

**Connection with Unit Theme:** To complement the small group study *How Can I Honor God in My Suffering?* Suffering always provides us an opportunity to glorify God. But it's also an opportunity for us to become bitter and respond poorly. In the Bible Joseph models for us a right response and how to glorify God in suffering.

### Introduction:

If you put an egg in boiling water then it becomes hard and unresponsive to the outside. It's shell hardens. But if you put a potato in boiling water the opposite happens, it becomes soft and adaptable. When we go through suffering we must decide if our situation is going to make us pliable in God's hands or if we'll kick against him and become hardened and bitter.

Joseph was certainly put into boiling water, but rather than it shaping him into a bitter man it made him even more rugged in his relationship with God.

#### 1. We honor God in our suffering when we refuse to use it as an excuse to sin.

There is a concept known as moral licensing. It's the idea that whenever we do something really good we give ourselves a bit of a pass on doing something not so good. As an example you do really well on your diet for three weeks and so you give yourself a huge pass at the all you can eat buffet.

There is also, I believe, something akin to victim licensing. It's the idea that because I have suffered in a certain area I deserve to be lax in another. So for Joseph, he could have easily argued from a position of suffering that he did not deserve to be in Potiphar's house. Sure he was over a household, but he was still a servant. He was a servant and God had given him dreams of ruling. He could have thought he deserved time with Potiphar's wife. But Joseph had deep integrity.

We too honor God in our suffering when we don't use it as an excuse to be lax in our spiritual disciplines or moral duties. Such a thing only compounds our problems. Though for Joseph, his integrity actually created more outwardly bad circumstances. But you cannot put too high of a value on a clear conscience.

#### 2. We honor God in our suffering when we refuse to give in to bitterness

If anyone had a right to become bitter it might have been Joseph. Sold into slavery by his brothers, falsely accused of sexual assault, forgotten about in prison, and a host of other instances of suffering. But he refused to be bitter.

Tony Evans tells the story of two monks who helped an elderly woman cross a river. They joined together hands and lifted her between them and carried her across the river. Once they got through the river they set her down. Another mile or so into the trip and one monk began to complain to the other. The other monk just smiled and nodded. The complaining continued after another mile or so: complaints of wet clothes, sore backs, and such. Finally the monk who hadn't been complaining said, "Have you wondered why I am not complaining?" he asked.

"Your back hurts because you are still carrying the woman. But I set her down five miles ago."

That describes many of us. The circumstances of our suffering is over but we are still "carrying the woman" in the form of bitterness. Joseph had quite the hefty bit he was carrying. But he too seems to have set these issues of suffering down. He didn't pick them up in the form of bitterness.

### **3. We honor God in our suffering when we use it for the good of others**

Joseph had every right to deny his brothers food. They had sold him into slavery. But instead he gave them grace. He did this because he had the perspective of God's goodness. He knew that his suffering was meant for the good of others. What others meant for evil God intended for good. Not only for Joseph, but more so God's kingdom and God's people.

I appreciate these words of Dave Zuleger:

God comforts us so *that* we can comfort others.

God grants us mercy so *that* we can be merciful to others.

God stands whole-heartedly with us in our suffering so *that* we will stand whole-heartedly with others who are suffering.

God never leaves us alone in our suffering so *that* we won't leave others alone in theirs.

### **Conclusion:**

In 8<sup>th</sup> grade Art class I had crafted a terrific dog out of clay. It was to be a ceramic masterpiece. But when it went into the furnace, Fido didn't make. Well, he kind of made it, but not really. He lost a leg, a tail, and his ears folded over. Truth be told he went into the furnace as a beautiful dog and came out the other end as a three-legged pig.

I had only one option. Fido's dog days had to be over. He'd now have to become Wilbur the pig. So I put on him a curly tail, a new leg, and tweaked his face a little. One quick trip into the kiln and out came Wilbur the pig that used to be a dog.

### **The moral of the story: The furnace of affliction changes us.**

As believers the Lord puts us into the furnace of affliction for our good and His glory. It is in the furnace of suffering that he chisels away our impurities. It is here that we become more moldable and easier to be used for His glory. We often go into the furnace as an arrogant dog, sure to win first prize. We come through the other end a

maimed pig—but a maimed pig that is more fit to be used for God’s glory and more receptive to enjoying God.

Yet I find in my heart a terrible tendency on the other side of the kiln. After I’ve been through the season of affliction I expect things to soon return to normalcy. “Normalcy” meaning life before the kiln. I long for things to go back to how they were before the furnace.

But it *can’t*. Life can’t go back to how *it* was because I am no longer who *I* was when entering the furnace. And I’m not meant to be. Nor should I want to be. The furnace is meant to strip away the old and shape us into who God wants us to be.

When I come out the other end of the furnace I’m not charged with getting my life back to how it was before the season of affliction. I am charged with learning to live and walk and breathe in the new. Trying to live like Fido doesn’t work when God decided Wilbur the pig was a better option.

Walk in the new. We’re called to glorify God through every season.

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