

FAITH IN ACTION: JOSEPH

Introduction

Recently we welcomed a 5th grandchild into our lives. Nolan was born in Colorado Springs, and we got to spend the first several days of his life with him and his family. It was such a blessing! (Nolan1.jpg)

I'm sure many of you have read Stephen Covey's best-selling book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. (7 habits. jpg) What are those 7 Habits?

1. **Be Proactive** – Take responsibility for your life, focusing on what you can control rather than what you cannot.
2. **Begin with the End in Mind** – Establish your goals and purpose in life, allowing them to guide and govern your decisions and priorities.
3. **Put First Things First** – Prioritize your time and energy for the most important things and learn to say “no” to less important things.
4. **Think Win-Win** – Seek mutual benefit in all interactions and relationships, looking for solutions that benefit everyone—if possible.
5. **Seek First to Understand, Then to Be Understood** – Listen empathetically and seek to understand others' perspectives before sharing yours.
6. **Synergize** – Work with others, knowing the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.
7. **Sharpen the Saw** – Take time to renew and improve yourself physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.

Joseph probably would really like all of these, but I think the 2nd habit would really resonate with him:

BEGIN WITH THE END IN MIND

It was by faith that Joseph, when he was about to die, said confidently that the people of Israel would leave Egypt. He even commanded them to take his bones with them when they left.

–Hebrews 11:22 NLT

Of all the things the writer of Hebrews could have said about Joseph, I find this a little surprising, if not disappointing. Is that all you have to say about Joseph? What about his technicolor dream coat? And how about those dreams? What about his rise from the pit to the pinnacle of Egyptian power?

I have lots of questions about this content but then remember what this writer of Hebrews is trying to do. Actually, I think the Book of Hebrews is a written sermon for a church that is confused and discouraged. Many have lost their way. Hope has diminished to a glimmer, and the glimmer is growing dimmer.

It seems all they can see is the immediate—the darkness right in front of them. They are focused on problems, persecution, and questions about suffering. They can't see past those to the end. People—probably family, maybe former friends—along with the culture generally are giving them a hard time for following Jesus.

Some of them have quit—they have stopped “going to church,” according to Hebrews 10:25. Others are apathetic, weak, and deconstructing their faith. They all need some encouragement, so our preacher preaches. It's encouragement and it's not sugar-coated. It's real, challenging, and a bit lovingly “in your face.”

The preacher begins and presents a compelling case—logical and reasonable—of how important it is and worth everything to follow Jesus. Then in chapter 10, there is an appeal to their hearts, an appeal that moves into chapter 11, where real people are listed—people who had faith that empowered them to overcome all kinds of things, including their faults, flaws, doubts, and discouragement. They overcame it all and made it to the end.

These people are called a “great cloud of witnesses” in chapter 12. The Preacher says, “They surround you and are cheering for you! They are examples for you. Hang in there and keep moving forward with God.”

Discussion

Joseph is in the house; he's in the stands. He is in the cloud of witnesses. He's one cheering for us! The original audience would have known all about him. His brief mention is just an icon that opens to his rich deep story. It's a story—as the Preacher points out—governed by the end in mind.

It's kind of a corny statement but I like it because it's true and profound:

TODAY IS THE FIRST DAY OF THE REST OF YOUR LIFE

So, let's join Joseph, and starting today, let's:

BEGIN WITH THE END IN MIND

Joseph's story, found in Genesis 37-50, begins when he's 17 years old. We quickly learn he grows up in a dysfunctional family. His dad, Jacob—quite the character—makes the horrible mistake of making Joseph his favorite child. For example, Jacob gives Joseph a really nice coat. The others—his brothers—get nothing. Naturally, they were jealous.

To make matters worse, Joseph was quite an articulate dreamer. He's 17 so there may be some arrogance involved. His dreams—and he loved to share them—were about people, including his brothers, bowing down to him. The brothers have heard enough. They can't stand it; they can't him. They hate him.

One day, Jacob sends Joseph to check on his older brothers out in the field. They see him coming. Jealousy and hatred, fueled by a father's favoritism, lead Joseph's brothers to take action. “Here comes that dreamer!” One of them says, “Let's put an end to this. Let's just kill him. Then we'll see what comes of his dreams.” Reuben, one of the older brothers, knows better than to kill him and suggests they throw him into a pit and see what happens.

“Hey, Little Joe, come over here; we want to show you something!” They surround him, grab him, and strip his coat off. No doubt they laugh as they throw him into the pit. They ignore his cries for help. It wasn't very long until a group of Midianite traders come by with their caravan of camels. They are on their way to Egypt. The murderous intentions of the brothers are quickly replaced by greed.

They pull Joseph out of the pit and sell him into slavery for 20 pieces of silver. Joseph is out of the pit and on his way to Egyptian slavery. Meanwhile, the brothers cover up their cruelty by killing a goat and dipping Joseph's precious coat in its blood. They take the bloody coat to their father and tell him Joseph is dead. Jacob is devastated, inconsolable, and really never gets over it—until some 20 years later when he finds out his beloved son is alive.

In Egypt, Joseph is bought by a man named Potiphar, a really important guy. Joseph becomes an excellent servant, highly trusted by Potiphar, but, then, Potiphar's wife tries to seduce Joseph. Joseph rejects her. Frustrated and angry by his rejection, she accuses him of rape. Joseph ends up in prison for something he did not do. But in prison, again, he is recognized as a person of value and integrity; he becomes a trustee.

Joseph the dreamer—now in prison—becomes the interpreter of dreams. Through a series of events—through God's guidance—Joseph is called to interpret the weird dreams of Pharaoh. Joseph explains that is by the power of God he can tell Pharaoh what these dreams mean. There is going to be a severe famine in the future, and Joseph tells Pharaoh how to deal with it. Pharaoh trusts Joseph and puts him in charge of managing the upcoming famine. “You're in charge; manage it.” Joseph does. Masterfully.

The Egyptians store up all kinds of food. Everything Joseph predicts by the power of God comes true. Joseph becomes one of the most powerful and respected men in the whole wide world.

Because of Joseph's God-directed actions, Egypt thrives while the rest of the world starves, seeking to survive. People from all over come to Egypt to buy food, bowing down to Joseph. Remember those dreams?

Guess who else comes, bowing and buying? Joseph's brothers, the ones who 20 years earlier sold their hated brother into slavery and had no clue what happened to him.

Joseph now walks like an Egyptian, and he looks like one too, so his brothers don't recognize him. What do they do? They bow down to him in humble adoration, seeking to avoid starvation, fulfilling the dreams of a 17-year-old boy, from 20 years earlier.

Joseph—his father's son—tricks and manipulates his brothers, and in the end, he gets his whole extended family, including his beloved father, to Egypt. Joseph reveals his identity. There are tears and fears, and all kinds of questions and concerns, but the story ends with Joseph and his family living peacefully in Egypt.

By faith, I believe there is an unspoken thread throughout this whole story that is highly instructive and so helpful for all of us. I express it like this:

BEGIN WITH THE END IN MIND

How else could have Joseph endured all he experienced? Throughout this story, the providence and protection of God is mentioned. Joseph must have had a sense of God's abiding presence—even in God's silence and seeming absence. Even in the pit. Even in prison.

Joseph had a rough way to go. He was a favored child, a child of great privilege, and then, suddenly, he was not. Yet, God was with him in the pit. As Joseph leaves the pit to begin his life of slavery, we are told:

The LORD was with Joseph, so he succeeded in everything he did as he served in the home of his Egyptian master.

—Genesis 39:2 NLT

Then after Potiphar's wife does her thing and Joseph unjustly goes to prison, we are told again:

While Joseph was there in the prison, the LORD was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden.

—Genesis 39:20b,21 NIV

Throughout all these challenges and trials of injustice, Joseph never gives up or gives in. He shows no signs of bitterness. He doesn't seem angry, nor does he develop a hard heart.

This points to a great faith that trusts God with the messes that are hard to explain, messes that reek of injustice and unfairness. It's faith that stands on the promises of God—that trusts God with unanswered questions. It's faith that has an end in mind.

Even in prosperity, as Joseph rises out of the pit to the pinnacle of Egyptian power, I believe he has a sense of God's abiding presence, where it is all going, and how it all ends. He doesn't forget.

Later in the story, as his brothers realize who Joseph is, they begin to worry about revenge, so Joseph assures them revenge is not in his heart. It's not there because Joseph can see how God is working toward an end.

. . . Do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you.

—Genesis 45:5 NIV

Later, Jacob dies; the brothers still worry about revenge. Responding, Joseph says some of the most powerful words about forgiveness, God's redemptive work, and how to begin processing stuff with the end in mind:

You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good. He brought me to this position so I could save the lives of many people.

—Genesis 50:20 NLT

We best see how Joseph has the end in mind, when we look at the end of his life. This, of course, is what our Preacher in Hebrews focuses on. Joseph—this most powerful man in Egypt—never loses sight of God and how in the end, God has promised a place for His people.

Joseph said to his brothers, “I am about to die. But God will surely come to your aid and take you up out of this land to the land he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.”

—Genesis 50:24 NIV

Joseph then makes his brothers promise to take his bones to the Promised Land when they eventually leave Egypt. Joseph knows Egypt is not his home. He is just passing through as a part of God’s plan. There are better days ahead and a better place awaiting. He never loses sight of the End!

By faith, I believe, he must have looked at each day, each episode of his life as a new beginning—the first day of the rest of his life. His faith sustained him, kept him encouraged, kept him dreaming of a day and a time when, “all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.” (Julian of Norwich)

And you know what? Joseph never experienced the Promised Land, but he believed he and his people would end up there. And he wanted his bones there. So Preacher of Hebrews says to the people and says to us, don’t give up and don’t give in. Just, each day,

BEGIN WITH THE END IN MIND

I know we all face challenges of all kinds. I have them; you, too. You know them too well. It’s so easy to allow those things—so large, heavy, and all-consuming—to put us in the pit, the pit of depression or despair. Once there, it’s easy to stay there. When we are in the pit, it’s easy to wonder if the promises of God are true. It’s easy to lose hope.

It’s during those times and seasons, we need to begin each day anew and take a long view—a view of hope that allows us to see around and through the problems and challenges, a view that keeps the end in mind. That hopeful end guides, governs, and provides peace, joy, and confidence—all based on the promises of God.

Conclusion

Little Nolan was born on July 5th. Several months earlier, as God was knitting him together (Psalm 139:13) in our daughter’s womb, he began an eternal journey. He joins all of us on this journey. It’s a journey that ends either in the presence of God forever or excluded from His presence forever, which is Hell.

Today is the first day of the rest of our lives. As we begin, let’s keep in mind the end. Because of what Jesus has done, we need not fear the end but look forward to it. The Preacher says it like this:

Everyone has to die once, then face the consequences. Christ’s death was also a one-time event, but it was a sacrifice that took care of sins forever. And so, when he next appears, the outcome for those eager to greet him is, precisely, salvation.

—Hebrews 9:27,28 THE MESSAGE

The problem is staying focused. We need to keep the End in mind. Every single day. Every step of the way. For decades, I’ve been involved in endurance athletics: distance running, cycling, and long-course triathlon. While most of that is in the past for me, I’m still dabbling in running. I like endurance athletics because it parallels our journey with Jesus. For me, it’s a spiritual discipline. If you don’t keep the end in mind, you’ll get discouraged, and the temptation to quit will present a compelling case. It’s then you must remember the end—the dream, the goal, and the reward of finishing. The desire to finish is greater than the temptation to quit. To keep my mind straight I employ a mantra, as many athletes do: Relentless Forward Progress.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith. Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God’s throne.

—Hebrews 12:1,2 NLT

Jesus kept the end in mind, and it brought him joy, even in the midst of unimaginable pain!

A few years ago, a childhood friend of mine died from cancer. Over the years, we lost touch. When he died, I reconnected with his family and helped with his burial in Mitchell. He had a funeral a little earlier in Texas where he lived for a long time. I learned that he planned his funeral. It began, shockingly, with the playing of AC/DC's song, *Highway to Hell*. The preacher preached, and then at the end of his funeral, they played Led Zeppelin's, *Stairway to Heaven*. It was my friend's way of describing his 50-something years of life. He spent part of it in rebellion on a highway to hell, but then he turned to Jesus and found a way—The Way—to Heaven.

In the song, *Stairway to Heaven*, Robert Plant sings,

*Yes, there are two paths you can go by, but in the long run
There's still time to change the road you're on*

Which road are you on this morning? Where is it going? Where does it end?

Response Time (9:30 & 11:00)

As we enter into a time of response, let's consider the End as we commune, worship, and examine our lives.

We commune with the End in mind. Certainly, we look back to the Cross and the Empty Tomb, but we also look forward to the End of life as we know it. We look to a time and place where everything will be made right and new. God will wipe every tear from our eyes. *"There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."* (Revelation 21:4) Paul says, in 1 Corinthians 11, when eat the bread and drink the cup, we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes—which is the glorious End we keep in mind as we begin each day.

We respond to the End with worship and examination. We worship a God Who—through Jesus—makes it clear that he wants us to be with Him. He gave His Son to make it possible. As we commune and worship over the next several minutes, let's all take a hard look at our lives. What are we doing? Where are we going?

Men, allow me to address you for just a moment. This is a confusing time for many men, so we are making a strong effort to reach out to men in our community. It's time for all of us to step up, get clear about where we are going, and get serious about the End. Join us on September 6 and learn how to be a Better Man.

Where does this road I'm on end? If you are not on the right road, there's still time to change, but there's no guarantee of how long any of us have. So, today is the day. It's the day of salvation! Repent and be baptized if that's what you need. Change roads if that's what you need to do. For those on the right road: keep moving forward with perseverance. Each day,

BEGIN WITH THE END IN MIND

Prayer.