

The Story of Joseph

Scent to Serve

Part 15 – May 27, 2012

Isn't it strange how certain smells instantly bring up powerful memories and emotions? And those scents are subjectively encoded as pleasant or unpleasant depending on our experience. That's why some people *love* the smell of doghouse and gasoline and tide flats, but *dislike* lilies (too many funerals). When I was in 3rd grade my dad was burned *really badly* (in the wrecking yard). My mom drove him to the hospital with my sister and me. 35 years later, Waikiki, luau, roasted pig ... *I passed!*



Well, Joseph is “encoding” some very distinct and spicy odors on his two-week, 300 mile slave march from Dothan (think Vancouver BC) to Egypt (think Washington-Oregon border).

After following Judah for 22 years, the author flashes all the way back to the sale of Joseph.

Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. – *Genesis 39:1a NIV*

And, just a reminder, Joseph *needed* to be “taken down”. He was bigheaded, insensitive, and downright rude when he shared the dreams God gave him. He came on too strong and poured it on too thick. And God’s sweet promises ended up nauseating those closest to him. It’s like being trapped in a car with an over-cologned uncle. What was meant to smell good becomes just sickening.



So, God allowed his brothers to betray him and sell him to the spice traders (the angry Ishmaelite side of the family) who took him down: from favored son to forsaken slave. Hebrews were utterly detestable to Egyptians, (Gen 43:32; Ex 8:26 says they’d stone ‘em if they saw ‘em sacrificing) especially *shepherds*, (Gen 46:34) so Joseph (a sacrificing, Hebrew, shepherd) was dreading a short life in cruel conditions, like a mine shaft, a rock quarry, or a sewage pit.

Joseph is the ultimate Old Testament example of Romans 8:28.

And we *know* [Notice, it doesn't say “trust” it says “know”, because this is either true or God isn't God. So, if you *know* there's a God, then you should *know* this as well] that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. [The key here is *his purpose*, not mine. He's a *journey*, not a *Genie!*] – *Romans 8:28 NIV*

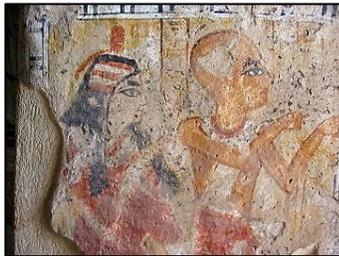
If you love the Lord and pursue his purpose, you can know that everything in your life has been, is, and will be an active ingredient in your uniquely created and deeply fulfilling purpose. He doesn't allow anything that you wouldn't allow if you had His perspective. That's hard to hold onto when you're in the middle of the story. Joseph pleaded in distress in the pit (Gen 42:21), so when they pass is home in Hebron, he probably pleaded with them.

“That’s my home. My dad is right there. He’ll reward you for more. Why won’t you talk to me?!”
And he probably pleaded *with God*: **“You gave me dreams! You promised! My brothers are supposed to bow down! Why are you ignoring me? Why aren’t you keeping your word? This isn’t fair!”**

We often demand He fulfill *our* desires (which sometimes seem like the only right and sensible thing), unwilling to acknowledge or accept the unpleasant aspects of life as a necessary part of the individual journey to who and what you were always meant to be.

Does it seem odd that Moses lists the traders’ inventory? He could’ve just said the brothers saw a caravan of Ishmaelites heading to Egypt; so, why’s he take the time to say the brothers saw ...

... a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from *Gilead*. Their camels were loaded with spices, [aromatic gums or powders] balm [the coveted *Balm of Gilead* (Jer 46:11) used in Roman times to make Royal Perfume for the Parthians (Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*)] and myrrh, [an intensely fragrant pitch later used by the Israelites in anointing oil (Ex 30:23)] and they were on their way to take them down to Egypt. – *Genesis 37:25b NIV*



Tomb of Shuroy, 1100 BC

These items were used for cosmetics, incense, medicine, and even tea, but above all they were used for Egyptian perfumes, which were noted throughout the ancient world for their potency. And they wore lots, men and women. They even mixed it with a big lump of fat to wear on their heads, so it would slowly melt and refresh itself. Some of this was found in King Tut’s tomb and still gave off a faint odor, 3,000 years later! And the raw ingredients were extremely pungent.

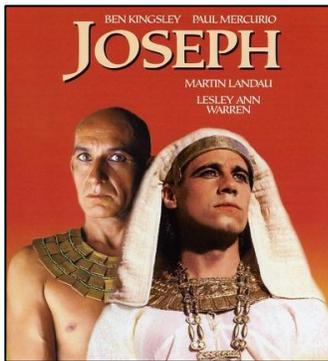
The brothers likely smelled the traders before they saw ‘em, depending on the wind! And for two weeks Joseph gagged on the overwhelming, nauseating aroma permeating his pores. It’d be like being trapped in windowless bus that was packed with over-cologned uncles. Sobbing, praying, pleading, vomiting, and begging God for mercy, his mind racing with thoughts of escape, revenge, and retaliation. Don’t make the mistake of thinking he wasn’t human. God appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob ... but not ever Joseph. **“Why won’t you talk to me?!”**



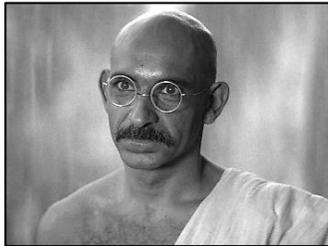
And then he enters the strange and foreign land of Egypt. Different language. Different culture. Different values. Different gods. Men wear wigs and eyeliner and lipstick, and a guy puts a snake in his mouth – wait, what?! Joseph is absolutely powerless to change his situation. His only hope, for the 2nd time (the pit), is God. And you know who is the polar opposite of Joseph?

Potiphar, an Egyptian who was one of Pharaoh’s officials, the captain of the guard ... – *Genesis 39:1b NIV*

Complete control. Seasoned military experience. He's head of the secret service. He immediately recognizes and acts on any attempt against Pharaoh. He's chillingly proficient in all weaponry.



He heads up an elite guard of the toughest soldiers in Egypt, and he keeps 'em in line! He's a specimen of strength, a sight to behold. In a one-on-one fight, Potiphar wins ... *every time* ... also in a two-on-one ... and a three-on-one. He has to. If he fails at his job it costs him his life. He knows this well, the royal prison is *in* his house/compound. (Gen 40:3) That's why he's no nonsense; nobody to fool with. He's well known, well respected and well, feared. Nothing important happens in his city without his knowledge and approval.



So why is it, that in every movie about Joseph, Potiphar is always played by someone like Ben Kingsley? Ben Kingsley is a great actor, but if the guy can play Gandhi, he shouldn't be playing Potiphar. You should picture Arnold Schwarzenegger in his prime ... with pyramids ... and Egyptian. Now *that's* a Potiphar! Even his name is bold and swaggering. Potiphar means, "he whom [the god] Ra gives". In other words, his nickname was "God's gift to the world". And he happened to be somewhere near the slave market that day.



Remember how Moses made a big deal out of the fact that these Ishmaelites were from Midian; they were Midianite-Ishmaelites?

[Chapter 37 ended this way:] Meanwhile, the **Midianites** sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard. – *Genesis 37:36 NIV*

Egypt imported its most expensive scents from East Africa and Arabia, where Midian was. Only the very rich could afford them. Camels aren't believed to have been widely domesticated at that time, which would make their mention in the story yet another indication of the wealth of these merchants. (Nelson study Bible 1997)



The slave market wasn't in the nicest part of town; cheats, kidnapers, and ne'er do well riffraff made it kind of ... horrible. A Pirates of the Caribbean kind of place. And when a despised Hebrew is brought in as a slave, and he reeks of a fragrance they could never afford, well, you can imagine how he was mocked and scorned and reviled. This is the end. He'll be blessed to live long enough to see a mine shaft or a pit of sewage. But, two weeks on the road, begging, bawling, and retching have given him a new perspective.

He's not going kicking and screaming, but silently trusting. He's growing! And he's seeing the things we only see through something like this. **"I shouldn't have shared my dreams the way I did. I misrepresented you by declaring how blessed and privileged and spiritual I thought I was. You are so good. I was so arrogant and ignorant. If only I could do it over again, Lord, which I know I can't, I would do it all so differently."**

Our trust is based on how we perceive God. If we think He's unfair and unkind we won't trust Him. But, if we see Him and embrace Him as Christ revealed Him, how can we *not* trust Him? Joseph's heart changes: **"If I die, I die for you; if I live, I live for you! Sell me to work in the deepest, deadliest mine shaft and I will be a light for you to those in the darkness; toss me in the sewage pits and I will be, for you, the sweetest smelling servant, *however* You choose to use me."**

For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. – 2
Corinthians 2:15-16a NIV

My heart changes when I choose to trust and serve where I'm sent. Joseph could've given himself permission to sink into bitterness and resentment, but he would've suffered the greatest loss in human history.

Jewish tradition says Potiphar was somewhere near the market when he caught a whiff of nobility where nobility *cannot be* without a large protective escort - which he would've been well aware of! And like an adrenaline charged freight train, Potiphar thunders through the vendors and bursts into the square, weapon drawn, eyes flashing, looking to identify, defend, and secure ... *who?* As he rapidly scans the retreating ring of terrified onlookers, they all point to a young, Hebrew slave, praying in the holding pen. Odd. He's well fed, well clothed, and well built.

Now Joseph was well-built and handsome ... – *Genesis 39:6b NIV*

As head of Pharaoh's palace guard, Potiphar has honed his skills for sizing up people quickly. Are they a threat? Are they trustworthy? And he swiftly recognizes inner strength, allegiance, integrity ... and a *great* set of pecs! **"You're like a little me. I am Pot-tee-fuh, but my friends call me the Pot-tee-nate-uh."**

Potiphar, an Egyptian who was one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him there. [And then, *finally*, after two full chapters, we read that] The Lord was with Joseph ... [in the pit, on the road, and in the market; God wasn't talking with Joseph, He was walking with Joseph] – *Genesis 39:1-2a NIV*

Whenever you're tempted to say, "God, why aren't you talking to me?!" you can *know* His response, "Because I'm walking with you." When your heart is broken, the Lord is with you. When your children are in trouble, the Lord is with you. Whenever you're betrayed, rejected, desperate, or hopeless, the Lord is with you. And when you "walk the talk" He lets you know that He's with you and working all things to His purpose and your eternal best.

Joseph doesn't have a clue what's coming. God is preparing this young, arrogant, insensitive kid to become the 2nd most powerful man in the world, in just 13 short years! But if you're God, how do you keep that kind of power from going to his head?! Maybe encode some humility and humanity. It'd only require some Arabian spices, the balm of Gilead, and myrrh.

Every dignitary he hobnobs with, every royal function he attends, whether alone with Pharaoh or surrounded by the upper crust, it'll always smell like begging and sobbing and pleading and retching. It'll always smell like our only hope is to put our rust in His purpose for us. And he'll never forget that he was sent *and scented* to serve.