

Ten Thousand Angels

1. Warm up: On Sunday Jeff told the story about a woman who hid the TV remote from her husband to get even with him after an argument. What precious little item in your household would you most miss if someone hid it from you?
2. The desire to get even is one of our most primal instincts. In Sunday's scripture passage, Joseph found himself in the perfect position to get even with his brothers who had sold him into slavery decades earlier. His initial impulse was to do just that. When they showed up in Egypt begging for food during the famine, Joseph put them through hell. Read Genesis 43:1-20, as printed on p. 3.
 - a. Joseph's impulse to get even with his brothers is understandable. Try to imagine the magnitude of pain and trauma he experienced at their hands when, as a teenager, his brothers sold him into slavery. On Sunday, Jeff reminded us of the experience of Abrego Garcia, the Venezuelan man recently arrested by ICE, misidentified as a gang member, and sent to a brutal El Salvadoran prison for indefinite detention, even though a U.S. court order authorized him to be in the U.S. Garcia was arrested while driving with his young son, never knowing if he'd see his son or wife again. If you were him, what thoughts and feelings would be swirling through your heart and mind as all this unfolded? And how would you feel about those who arrested and imprisoned you?
 - b. After his brothers sold him off, Joseph became a slave in Egypt and eventually even landed in prison on false charges. He suffered greatly. Decades later when his brothers bowed before him (without recognizing him) begging food, Joseph had his chance to get even. He spoke harshly, accused them of being spies, threw them all in the same prison where he had been held, and even threatened to have them executed (Gen. 42:20). Do you blame him? In your own life, who's the person you've been most tempted to want to get even with? If an alien asked you what it feels like to want vengeance, how would you describe that feeling?
 - c. Clearly Joseph was a flawed hero, but virtually every Bible hero is. Why do you suppose that is?
 - d. Ultimately, Joseph overcame the impulse to avenge himself. Instead of resenting his suffering, he decided to embrace it and allow something beautiful to be born out of it. He came to realize that his journey of suffering was the very thing that had brought him to the place where he could save the entire extended family and millions others from famine. The results were remarkable. The descendants of his extended family eventually became the nation of Israel, gave us the Old Testament, and ultimately gave us Jesus himself. None of that could have happened if Joseph hadn't embraced his suffering and partnered with God to draw something beautiful from it. When in your life have you witnessed or even directly experienced something beautiful come from great suffering?

3. There's a theological term for what Joseph did. It's called Redemptive Suffering. Redemptive Suffering happens when we recognize that great good can come from our suffering if, instead of resenting and resisting it, we embrace it and partner with God to draw something beautiful out of it. That's exactly what Jesus did during Passion Week, culminating in the cross. At any point in the process of his horrendous suffering, Jesus could have called 10,000 angels (Matthew 26:53) to exact the wrath of heaven against his oppressors. And oh what a bloodbath it would have been! Imagine all those angels slaughtering the Romans and all those who mocked Jesus and falsely accused him. Jesus would have had every right to do it – to act in self-defense. But he didn't. Instead he partnered with God to bring something beautiful out of his suffering. His death saved us, all of us. So that to this very day, beauty is still flowing from Jesus' suffering.
 - a. Referring to Jesus, Isaiah 53:5 says, "By his stripes we are healed." What do you think that means?
 - b. Suppose Jesus rejected suffering, and never went to the cross, and therefore you never came to know him in your life. How would your life be different?
 - c. In addition to Jesus and Joseph, Jeff offered two contemporary examples of Redemptive Suffering: Michael J. Fox (in his triumphant battle with Parkinson's) and the freedom struggle of the people of India led by Mahatma Gandhi. Why do you think Redemptive Suffering has so much power to take negative energy and transform it into something positive?
4. Jesus calls all who follow him to repeat the pattern of Redemptive Suffering in our lives. So let's think about the implications of that.
 - a. In Luke 14:27, Jesus said, "Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." What do you think it means to "take up your cross?" Why is it impossible to be a disciple of Jesus if we're not willing to take up our cross?
 - b. Name an area of your life right now where you are experiencing pain or suffering. What would it look like for you to resist and resent that pain or suffering? Conversely, what might it look like for you to embrace it and partner with God to seek to draw something beautiful from it? What might that beauty turn out to be?
 - c. At the end of his sermon, Jeff implored us to "not waste our suffering." When in your life have you ever wasted your suffering or observed someone who has? Are you personally at a place where you're willing to embrace the following affirmation? "I am going to make peace with my suffering, embrace it, and partner with God to draw something beautiful from it!"

Genesis 42:1-20, selected verses

When Jacob learned that there was grain in Egypt, he said to his sons, 'Why do you keep looking at one another? ²I have heard', he said, 'that there is grain in Egypt; go down and buy grain for us there, that we may live and not die.' ³So ten of Joseph's brothers went down to buy grain in Egypt. ⁴But Jacob did not send Joseph's brother Benjamin with his brothers, for he feared that harm might come to him.

⁶ Now Joseph was governor over the land; it was he who sold to all the people of the land. And Joseph's brothers came and bowed themselves before him with their faces to the ground. ⁷When Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them, but he treated them like strangers and spoke harshly to them. 'Where do you come from?' he said. They said, 'From the land of Canaan, to buy food.'

⁸Although Joseph had recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him. ⁹He said to them, 'You are spies; you have come to see the nakedness of the land!' ¹⁰They said to him, 'No, my lord; your servants have come to buy food. ¹¹We are all sons of one man; we are honest men; your servants have never been spies.' ¹²But he said to them, 'No, you have come to see the nakedness of the land!' ¹³They said, 'We, your servants, are twelve brothers, the sons of a certain man in the land of Canaan; the youngest, however, is now with our father, and one is no more.' ¹⁴But Joseph said to them, 'It is just as I have said to you; you are spies! ¹⁵Here is how you shall be tested: as Pharaoh lives, you shall not leave this place unless your youngest brother comes here! ¹⁶Let one of you go and bring your brother, while the rest of you remain in prison, in order that your words may be tested, whether there is truth in you; or else, as Pharaoh lives, surely you are spies.' ¹⁷And he put them all together in prison for three days.

¹⁸ On the third day Joseph said to them, 'Do this and you will live, for I fear God: ¹⁹if you are honest men, let one of your brothers stay here where you are imprisoned. The rest of you shall go and carry grain for the famine of your households, ²⁰and bring your youngest brother to me. Thus your words will be verified, and you shall not die.' And they agreed to do so.