BIBLE STUDY

PERSEVERE IN YOUR WITNESS

It could be argued that our everyday search in the Caribbean for meaning and purpose in life as well as our desire to live faithfully within the said construct currently resembles a canvas with more shades of grey than distinct and obvious colours. At almost every turn, life and living challenges, surprises, confounds, or even confuses us.

The truth is we exist within a context of **uncertainty**.

Our existential uncertainty is grounded in an era characterized by rapid and escalating change. It is difficult to be certain about things if their meaning and purpose are constantly being redefined. Artificial Intelligence is currently redefining truth, work, humanity, divinity and our social engagement.

For centuries the church was located at the centre of the moral framework of Christian nations, it was the church, which set the agenda for the fabric of living together in community. Now however, the changing landscape would suggest that it is the lobby or interest groups of all types that agitate for moral, legal and societal change. Indeed, there is a religious fervor associated with such groups that must be recognized and understood.

Political correctness, appropriate labels and sensitivity have become the mantra for peaceful co-existence. Conversations, groupings and points of identification are required to be so ordered as to not offend another or communicate any type of bias or discrimination.

Aid in the form of financial resources are, for the most part, no longer offered from one nation to another to simply bring about change or to enable transformation or to address critical concern. Instead, they are inextricably linked to clearly articulated agendas and are provided only on the basis that departure from the stated agenda will result in the discontinuation of the aid. Those who have the strongest voice and influence usually have the deepest pockets.

We live in the context of uncertainty.

We also live in the context of **conflict**.

We are intimately exposed in this region to conflict of every nature, whether violent, political, communal or even religious. Guns, knives, voices are used to dispose of, dominate, decimate,

discriminate and dismiss others. We interface with these external conflicts on a daily basis and they co-exist with our internal conflicts of self-image, self-worth and self-actualization. We could spend the rest of the year wrestling with the intricate nature of the global conflicts in the Middle East and in Ukraine alone.

The ongoing changing nature of life and living, combined with conflicts, both external and internal, serve to produce moral **confusion** for the Christian at every level. What ought we to believe and how ought we to behave in such times?

It could reasonably be said that the current times represent an era constantly re-defining itself but is nevertheless characterized by **uncertainty, conflict and confusion**.

My limited reading of scriptures suggests that as believers, whose purpose is to be agents of transformation; salt and light, lending flavor and offering direction for life and living, such a purpose will set us up and set us apart.

We need to wrestle with this setting up and setting apart principle. One consistent criticism of the church by some among us and among those we serve and seek to advocate for or accompany, is that church while it declares its engagement in mission seems very comfortable in blending in with the proverbial crowd or restated, the predominant or prevailing culture.

Here we are, 150 years since the forming of World Alliance of Reformed Churches, forerunner of WCRC and 20 years after the ACCRA Confession, focused on the theme **Persevere in your witness.** At a glance, it does appear to be a redundant exercise. Is it that we wish to hear yet another perspective in addition to the numerous others we have reflected on over the years or is it that our intention is once again reaffirm what we have heard and possibly understood but have not consistently pursued or lived out, or are our expectations pushing us into another direction?

I have a very uncomplimentary theory about church, certainly in the Caribbean at this time. I believe we have become gluttons for nurture and spiritual development; we seemingly spend quite a bit of time nourishing and feeding ourselves in worship and study and reflection and might I add producing compelling statements, theological and otherwise but spend less time using what we have produced, consumed, gleaned or understood in the ***practice*** of faithfully demonstrating the faith. But that's my baggage and I will not saddle you with it.

I wish to assume the view that our intention during this Assembly is to reaffirm what is already known. A reaffirmation combined with a challenge and strong encouragement to give a fuller expression of perseverance, that is, living faithfully in challenging times.

My intention through this bible study is to explore with you a moral grounding for persevering in our witness.

Any insightful reading or reflection on the story of Joseph will expose a cardinal theme. This theme is exposed and expressed at every significant recorded juncture or moment of Joseph's life. It is a theme containing both divine and human elements; sometimes these elements are in concert with each other and at other times they are in conflict with each other. This compelling theme, which requires deep contemplation, discernment and focused passion, is **purpose**!

Joseph's story is told against the multi-layered backdrop of purpose - his favoured status by his father Jacob through the tangible expression of the multi-coloured coat; his transition from a being trapped in a pit to slavery, from slavery to estate manager, from estate manger to prisoner, from prisoner to prime minister. At every turn in this fascinating and intriguing story that which was sometimes in the shadows and at other times in the forefront was purpose, Jacob's purpose, Joseph's brother's purpose, the Ishmaelite's purpose, Potiphar's purpose, Potiphar's wife's purpose, the jailor and baker's purpose, Pharaoh's purpose.

Critical for our consideration today will be Joseph's purpose and of course present in all the pivotal moments, God's purpose.

I wish then to re-state our theme of perseverance using Joseph's encounter with Potiphar's wife in Genesis 39:

I will not bow, but will faithfully pursue my purpose.

The younger of my two daughters has a moral compass that consistently astounds me. I would love to say that she got this compass, in its totality, from me but if truly tested that notion would not hold true. I cannot forget one Father's Day when as a family we visited a familiar shopping mall in Kingston Jamaica. As I drove out of the mall, I failed to notice that the exit, which I consistently used, had been converted into a one-way entrance. I was almost beyond the point of no return and continued on and incorrectly exited the facility. Located in the back seat of the car, my daughter started sobbing loudly and when I enquired why she was weeping, she basically said, *how could you daddy? You are a minister of religion; you should be setting the standard and not breaking the rules.* Needless to say, I was overcome with shame and regret; my actions had not only disturbed and distressed my child, they had disappointed her as well.

There is a deeper issue here. My daughter was disturbed by my visible witness of doing the wrong thing and rightly declared that such action was inconsistent with my faith, my calling and my purpose.

What constitutes the moral framework, which allows us to persevere in our witness, to faithfully pursue and live out our purpose? What represents and offers us the moral guide to undergo and overcome the mountain of issues we face in these times, whether as individuals, denominations or as an ecumenical faith community?

When tempted, as I was, to cross the moral boundary of correct behaviour what or who sits in our back seat and either, weeps, warns or rebukes us about our indiscretions or inconsistencies?

We are very familiar with this story - Joseph is bought by an Egyptian named Potiphar from the Ishmaelites and takes up residence in his new master's home. When Potiphar observes how he prospers under Joseph's care, he appoints Joseph to a position of authority, entrusting him with the care of the entire household. The text makes it clear that the agency behind this success is divine, it is God's purpose through and presence with Joseph at every step, opening doors and providing opportunities for his progress from slave to estate manager and blessing his endeavors.

Let us be clear, at this point Joseph had many things going for him: He was blessed by God (whatever he did the Lord made it ***prosper*** [2, 23] – the Hebrew word means to cleave, to penetrate and to advance. The idea here is that of a gift, it is not earned or promised, it is not a right but a blessing); he was handsome; successful; had power and authority, was admired and was upwardly mobile. He had moved from a hole in the ground to upper class housing, from proverbial rags to riches, from ignominy to fame. He had moved from poverty, to prosperity to power.

Almost at the height of his upward rise Joseph is tempted and pursued by Potiphar's wife.

Joseph's encounter with Potiphar's wife is both intriguing as it is disturbing. Themes with moral implications abound in this encounter, including **marital neglect and sexual freedom.** Indeed, this episode of Joseph's life has often been interpreted as a morality tale, designed to specify the limits of sexuality for believers. Yet, it is so much more than that as I hope to demonstrate.

Other themes are associated with Potiphar's wife. She has the distinction of being the only woman given a role of consequence in the Joseph's story to this point. Though unnamed, she is blessed with **independence**, **freedom** and exercises significant **power** in the confrontations with Joseph and her husband.

We have as well, the moral themes of **identity and status.** Note that both Potiphar and his wife are always defined in term of their status and station in life (master, master's wife, captain of the guard) and when things went south, Joseph was described as a Hebrew an inferior national identity and status.

I could speak about the moral issue of **laziness,** which characterized Potiphar, his only interest, it would seem was in eating, he neglected everything and everyone else, including his wife. There is a cardinal truth about temptation which must not escape us.

Temptation is fundamentally the wrestling with some desire. An impulse creates a desire to which a response is required. In essence, a temptation is a test intended to bring out either the worst in us or the best in us. You good believers here have been taught well that the temptation itself is not sinful, rather it is the yielding that initiates disconnection from the divine will and way, results in disobedience and critically dishonours God.

Yet, I am intrigued with the facets of temptation outlined in this text. Four of them are worthy of our consideration.

Firstly, there is the issue of **Entitlement.**
When Mrs. Potiphar extended the invitation to Joseph to have sex with her, in addition to the creative methods she employed in presenting herself and offering the invitation to Joseph, there was indeed another coded message. Permit me a bit of liberty with the text -
Joseph you have been given free reign of the estate, the only person who outranks you is my husband, you have been the chief architect of his prosperity and that of this estate, you have had a rough time with your family, some a result of your own entitlement, that multicolored coat and your borderline arrogant dream, created the estrangement and the cause of much of your pain and distress, Joseph, you deserve more, you deserve better, you have paid your dues and you are entitled to more.

Now before we all act as spectators to this drama of Mrs. Potiphar and Joseph, are we immune to the temptation of believing that we, entitled or not, deserve more? We have been faithful and dedicated believers, we have moved up the ranks in our vocation, denomination, congregation, places of employment, in our community, in this ecumenical and similar spaces, we have done our time and paid our dues, we have suffered at the hands of those who have dominated and domineered us. We deserve better, indeed we are entitled to the benefits, to the rewards, to the recognition, to the office, to the status and to the celebration?

Truth: Every temptation is centered on the principle of entitlement.

Secondly, on the heels of entitlement comes **Enticement.**
It is not that Mrs. Potiphar did not know the boundaries, there was the explicit statement by Joseph that Potiphar had indicated that Mrs. Potiphar was not included in his compensation package. Enticement is the expansion of the boundaries of entitlement; enticement says, you not only deserve more you should and can have more, indeed you don't need permission you can simply take it. Who else will know? You can do things above and under that table, behind closed

doors, out of town or overseas, establish alliances, make deals and establish partnerships towards your own improved position or assets or status.

One of the greatest threats to the visibility and the viability of the church's witness in these challenging times is the constant yielding to the temptation of the enticement of entitlement.

Thirdly, there is **Entrapment**
My sisters and brother please note this well. Temptation will not cease at the first or second sign or action of resistance, indeed temptation will stop at nothing and there are no boundaries. Temptation does not have a moral conscience; it will not feel sorry for you or intimate that you deserve a break.

Mrs. Potiphar was not deterred by Joseph's resistance, indeed she simply planned in greater detail and with greater determination. It is clear that she noticed that Joseph was avoiding contact with her and so she cleared out the house one morning and increased her efforts and was rewarded with Joseph's coat. I hope you notice that on both occasions when Joseph got imprisoned it was because of a coat...a blessing and equally a burden...

Fourthly, there is **Enforcement**
Enforcement is the harsh imposition of another's will upon another undeserving person, institution or nation. Unable to get her way she sets out to destroy Joseph. With Joseph and his coat in her power she concocts a story with the servants, complains to her master in terms meant to illicit guilt and anger for bringing Joseph home in the first place and having a foreigner disrespecting his wife and the household. The outcome is that Joseph is imprisoned.

I hope it is not lost upon you the moral elements of untruth, the abuse of freedom and power in the victimization of the innocent present in this narrative and more significantly, the absence of remorse or regret on the part of the perpetrator.

What do we do when we do get our way, how do we represent or tell or retell our story to others, how do we treat those who are within our powers and under our influence?

While this text highlights the issue of temptation it also exposes the themes of **Discernment, Decision and Determination,** all required to confront and overcome temptation.

Joseph's actions demonstrated the discernment and determination required to resist temptation. In resisting Mrs. Potiphar, Joseph based his response to her on the principle of authority, both human and divine. He said two things, which represented his moral compass and center and which enabled him to persevere in his witness.

Firstly, in speaking truth to power he said, **you are his wife**! *You are not written in the contract of my entitlements; my authority is equal to your husband's except in this one area. You do not belong to me and I have no claim or right to you.*
Mrs. Potiphar had presented herself in terms of power rather than love, of command rather than seduction. Joseph clearly indicates that to yield to her wishes would be an irresponsible exercise of his office. She raised the issue of **power**; he responded by raising the issue of **trust.**

The character of Joseph is very evident in this text. Joseph works as an efficient, diligent, and competent administrator, which enables God to work more effectively through him. Moreover, he is loyal, patient under stress, and filled with wisdom (his loyalty mirrors God's, v. 21). The **trust** that Potiphar places in him (v. 6), as well as this encounter with Potiphar's wife, are no doubt intended to speak directly to this point.

Discernment... Joseph separates the issues, this is not about a fleeting moment of pleasure, rooted in self-gratification, this is not about power or control or privilege, rather it is about trust and tied up with trust are a basket of values that would be distorted, damaged and destroyed if he were to yield to this enticement to entitlement. His moral compass was working!

Secondly, he said, **how could I do this great wickedness and sin against God?**
Here Joseph exercises discernment by hinting at the sin of adultery and locating the act within the context of his faith. To commit this act is to sin against God. He remains true to God and by doing so he maintains his values, his identity, his integrity, his responsibility and significantly he remains true to his master. Adultery for Joseph was an irresponsible use of power and a violation of the trusting relationship he has both with Potiphar and with God. Such an act did not align with God's purpose for him. His moral compass was working!

Given the misalignment, he arrived at a position and acted upon it, he fled! **Decision and determination**. His moral compass was working!

Joseph therefore, by discerning and being determined about his decision, does justice to relationships, both with human beings and with God—and both are important in their own right. This was in keeping with God's purpose for him. His moral compass was working!

I wish to restate Joseph's argument rooted in discernment, decision and determination:
I will not bow, for to do so is to sacrifice my **integrity –** Being consistent in who I am and whose I am. This self-understanding must mean something. I must **be** something! This is my **being**, the core of who I am...

I will not bow, for to do so is to sacrifice my **responsibility –** faithfully doing what is right despite the cost. Consistent with my being, I must **do** something!

I will not bow for to do so is to sacrifice my **Moral Values –** I have set some high standards for myself and I intend to maintain these high standards for someone in the back seat weeps, warns and will rebuke me if I slip or fall. I must **stand** for something!

I will not bow for to do so is to sacrifice my **identity –** I am God's child and servant and God has a purpose for my life. I must **be** and **do** and **stand** for something!

Joseph does not succumb to the very real temptation rooted in abusive power. His actions have considerable effect on how God works in and through him. Who Joseph is and what Joseph does make a difference to God's work in the world. In turn, God's work in Joseph enables him to mature and develop in ways that would not otherwise be possible.

What then are the lessons for our consideration?

1. **FAITHFULNESS WILL ALWAYS BE TESTED.**

As a consequence, if we are to have an effective moral center to guide us in the face of temptation, we must understand the character of temptation.

We speak about God's will and way and wisdom and power and presence but if we don't have an appreciation for how temptation works, then half the battle is already lost.

Temptation of the type related in this story has a character which is grounded in **deception**, its methodology is **distortion** and its ultimate motive is to extract usefulness then exercise **disposal** once we outlive our usefulness. Temptation of this sort demeans and dehumanizes people, their personhood, their livelihood and their living.

Temptation of the type related in this story is prevalent in the stories and spaces represented in this General Assembly; Professor Roderick Hewitt raised 7 areas relative to the Caribbean and opined that these are the missional spaces we cannot evade or avoid: they include poverty, migrants, cultural alienation, fragmentation, work, inclusion, climate and land justice and might I add the church. Is there any other institution where pretense is more prevalent? Entitlement is the root cause of many of the challenges we face in the church, power and privilege and position and even posture is evident among us. The marketplace is very present within the church.

Some of you have named the spaces in the sharing of the stories of perseverance in your church's mission and we celebrate the continuing efforts to meeting the needs of others. Your perseverance in these efforts will be tested, don't bow or give in when tempted to do so in the face of criticism, limited support, apprehension or opposition.

2. FAITHFULNESS IS ALWAYS COSTLY

Joseph was a man of virtue and did not bow to the forces of power and status but was entrapped and wrongly punished. He was put in prison without the presentation of evidence or the opportunity to offer a defense. He was an innocent victim reduced to silence. Yet, God never left him.

Hear Joseph crying to us in the midst of the moral challenges and temptations we face at every level:
I may have had a checkered history. I may have fallen on hard times, but I have had some good times as well, I may not have the pedigree of my peers, I know hardship and pain and suffering and distress, indeed I am intimate with victimization. Yet, through every experience and in every experience, my one constant has been God! God in the ditch with me when I did not have enough to eat or to feed those hungry with me, when I felt the intense pain of betrayal and disappointment, the despair of being abandoned and forsaken, when I had to cope with disillusionment; God with me in the valley as together we rode out the external and the internal storms, God on the mountain side with me when I could see my way again!
I will not bow even if I have to go back from whence, I have come; I will not bow for the simple reason that God was there in the beginning, God is here now and God will be there again wherever I end up for God is with me, God has promised never to leave nor forsake me, I will not bow to another, less impressive, less powerful and less deserving God! I will faithfully follow my purpose in God!

Remember my friends we may never see the results of our efforts on this side of life, so continue on, persevere in your witness.

3. FAITHFULNESS REQUIRES INTEGRITY.

The reason Joseph prospered whether in a well or an estate or in jail was because he reflected the meaning of the Hebrew word *prosper,* to cleave, to penetrate and advance in God's purpose.

The temptation to depart from the established will and purpose of God is grounded in deception. Each time we are tempted to expand our boundaries of entitlement; we are also encouraged to maintain our integrity; to remain within God's purpose.

Each time we are enticed to take what does not rightly belong to us at the same time we are encouraged to maintain our responsibility.

Each time we find ourself entrapped and we are tempted to yield and to give in or give up we will at the same time be encouraged to stand our ground to maintain our high moral and ethical standards.

Each time we are confronted with enforcement, injustice and inequity and inequality, we are at the same encouraged to remember our identity, those who live faithfully and who exercise uncompromising faith in the challenging times and to resist and challenge when and where necessary!

Remember well what we are entitled to is the result of hard work; everything else must be considered as a gift, with or without strings attached...

Our task in this ever changing conflictual and confusing era is to:
Resist the invitation to entitlement
Discern the face of enticement
Understand the methods of entrapment
Challenge the enforcement which results in injustice

Do not bow, do not bow, do not bow, persevere in your witness, faithfully follow God's purpose!

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Primary Source:
New Interpreters Bible., 1995-2002