

The Coat of Many Colors

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Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age. Also he made him a tunic of many colors. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peaceably to him (Genesis 37:3-4).

When we make the effort to live a good life, we will face persecutions. Other people may openly ridicule us or be offended when we try to do what is right. They may misinterpret our motives. They may also be upset that their way of life is no longer as convenient for them because of our efforts to be honest and charitable. This will result in resentment and bitterness toward us. People may be constantly reminded that their way of life will end in a total waste. And this continual reminder will diminish their enjoyments. Our efforts to become a true disciple of the Lord may very well cost friendships and create bitter enemies for us.

However, in reality, the majority of our persecutions actually come from within ourselves. We are told in the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church, that when we choose consistently to do what is good, evil spirits will burn with an intense hatred toward us. They will resent us, because they can not control us. Every time we choose to do something wrong or disorderly, we provide a place for the evil spirits to indulge their affections. Conversely, when we choose what is good, their corrupt pleasures are dampened.

Specifically, evil spirits attack us by stirring up or arousing our selfish tendencies and attitudes. We all have dispositions, from our heredity, to regard only ourselves and to use others for our own benefit. Therefore, when evil spirits fight to remain in control of our lives, they come into the selfish desires that reject the paths that lead to heaven. So, when we fight against our bad habits and loves, we are fighting against evil spirits. Fortunately, the life of Joseph shows how the Lord can help us to endure the persecutions of evil and how, if we keep looking to Him, He can give us eventual victory.

First, Joseph brought to Jacob, his father, a critical report against his brothers. When we consistently seek to learn and apply what is true, we will recognize both the evil that surrounds us and the evil that is within us. We are plainly told, in the Heavenly Doctrine, that we can only recognize what is evil by knowing and accepting what is true. If we do not apply what is true to our lives, we will not be able to identify what is evil and false. As long as we justify a selfish life, we are unable to make sound judgements as to what is genuinely proper. One of the consequences of falsities is they make the truth cloudy. They prevent the truth from being seen in a clear light. So long as the truth is vague, our ability to distinguish good and evil is not as sharp. This is why when truth is plainly seen, evil reacts with hatred. It cannot conceal itself as much as it once did.

Joseph represents the ability to recognize evil. And because his brothers were no longer able to enjoy their irresponsible conduct, they were bitter toward Joseph when he told Jacob of their improper actions. When we are confronted with the truth, it will expose our selfish tendencies.

These tendencies react with aggression to remove the truth so that we can continue to live a self-serving life.

We are told that Joseph was Jacob's favorite son. The special relationship between Jacob and Joseph represents the conjunction between our spiritual desire to do good and our natural desire to do good. Most people want to live a decent moral life. However, many want to live a proper life so as to avoid punishment, or to be regarded as an honest and upstanding person so they may receive benefits and praise. Many have a desire to live a moral life strictly for the sake of self. There is very little consideration about how one's actions will effect others. This is a natural desire.

There is nothing wrong in wanting to avoid punishment or striving to have a solid reputation. But if we are to grow spiritually, such desires must be purified; they must start to come from a love of being useful and serving our neighbor. This happens when spiritual principles motivate our life of morality. Then, concern for our personal reception of the Lord and for our effect upon others will have a predominant influence over how we live. The spirituality that is then within our morality is pictured by the close bond between Jacob and Joseph.

Because Joseph was so special to Jacob, he made for Joseph a coat, or tunic, of many colors. This beautiful coat distinguished Joseph from the rest of his brothers. Because this coat was a constant symbol that Joseph was Jacob's favorite, it was the initial cause of Joseph's persecution. Because of the coat, the brothers hated Joseph and held him in contempt.

This special coat pictures spiritual truth becoming manifest in the conduct of our lives. We are displaying the Lord's truth in diverse ways. The various colors picture the endless variety of ways we can show the Lord's love toward others. From the Lord we know how to be supportive, how to teach, when and how we should offer meaningful help, and even how we can charitably rebuke or chastise another when it is appropriate and can lead to a greater good.

Joseph then had two dreams. He dreamt that the brother's sheaves bowed down to his sheaves, and the brother's stars, along with the sun and moon, bowed down to his star. These dreams illustrate the Lord's giving us the ability to imagine ourselves being in control over selfish and destructive affections. We can imagine having power over our tendencies to love ourselves alone and to use others for our own advantage. For example, if we have a problem in controlling our temper, we can picture ourselves being able to keep our temper under control and not lashing out at others. An alcoholic can picture himself or herself rising above the bondage of drinking and living a life free from alcohol. If we enjoy indulging in thoughts and desires that are lewd, we can imagine ourselves free from such influences. We can visualize ourselves enjoying things that are pure and wholesome. When we live according to what we know to be true, we have the ability to view ourselves as being free from the thoughts, affections, and delights that we are fighting against in the present.

Of course, the brothers were even more upset with Joseph when he told them about his dreams. When disorderly affections within us "notice" that we have an image of ourselves that rules over sensual desires, they burn with an intense hatred toward that vision. They want to take our coat from us, to take away our clear understanding of how we are to personally worship the Lord and serve our neighbor, and, instead, put us in a state of confusion and despair. They do this by mingling our understanding of truth with the falsities that justify a sensual life. This is

represented by the coat being dipped in blood. His brothers dipped Joseph's coat in the blood of a kid to convince their father that he had been killed by wild animals.

Yet, the brothers did not destroy the coat. This may remind us of the Lord's garments during His crucifixion. The soldiers took his outer garment and ripped it apart, but the inner garment was left intact, and they cast lots for it. Likewise, Joseph's coat was not split apart. Our understanding of truth can be attacked and even have acts of violence done to it, but our spiritual enemies can never destroy it, for the Lord protects and preserves it. And when we remain committed to truth, even during times of confusion and doubt, the Lord will make us stronger and more enlightened in the end.

How did Joseph overcome his persecutions and temptations? He remained faithful in complying with what is right, faithful to the Lord, and he endured all the afflictions that were dealt toward him. He never wavered in doing the best he could despite his difficult circumstances. And by remaining faithful towards what is good, he distinguished himself as a person who could be trusted to perform useful services. He did not focus upon his slavery, false accusations, nor his imprisonment. He focused upon what he could do with the Lord's guidance, and this attitude helped eventually him to rise to a position of great power.

We must endure times of spiritual bondage, false accusations, and imprisonments before our spiritual dreams become a reality. It is by going through these difficult states of life that our selfish tendencies are removed from us. And the Lord assures us that eventually we will reach a state where we can rule over our selfish allurements.

Everyone must face some persecutions if they are to grow spiritually. Yet, the Lord does not allow anything to happen that is not capable of benefiting us spiritually, and this includes the temptations and the persecutions that we are required to go through. Only by enduring these attacks can we become a strong and effective disciple of the Lord. Only by resisting our corrupt desires and pleasures can they be removed from us. During these times, we will feel the loneliness of Joseph in the deep and dark pit. We will feel his bondage and the oppression of his slavery. And we will sense disillusionment when there is the appearance of being imprisoned for making the effort to do what is right. Yet, these troubling times will actually be opportunities to grow in appreciation for, commitment to, and understanding of a life of devotion to the Lord's teachings.

As we endure these difficult times, we are allowing the Lord to prepare us to make a meaningful contribution toward the kingdom He is continually establishing in heaven and upon the earth. When we sense times of loneliness and bondage from our corrupt loves, we should remember the life of Joseph. If we remain faithful to what we know is true, we will eventually rule over our base desires and enter into the peace that the Lord provides. "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:10).

Amen.

Lessons: Genesis 37:23-36; John 19:23-27; *Arcana Coelestia* 4677