

The Test Of Prosperity

Genesis 41

Introduction

If you have been studying the life of Joseph with us, you have noticed that his life thus far, has been a whirlwind of reversals. Joseph was the favored son of his father. He was adorned by him, with a coat that reached to his ankles and to his wrists, which denoted nobility and exempted him from the hard labor that his brothers would have to perform.

However, Joseph then ends up in a pit because his jealous brothers are determined to wipe out this dreamer. But when all seems to be at a loss, he is, instead of being killed, sold to Midianites. That would perhaps be the low point in his life, as he is standing, stripped naked, on the auction block to be sold to the highest bidder. That bidder happens to be Potiphar.

God gives Joseph favor in Potiphar's eyes and he is soon elevated and promoted and given a great responsibility. But then, as you probably remember, Potiphar's wife decides to sink her talons into his character. Because he refused, Joseph ends up in prison. That is another low point in his life.

Then, the cupbearer and baker of the Pharaoh, who were placed in prison with Joseph, have dreams. It seems that there is hope because he is able to interpret their dreams and knows one of them will be taken out of prison. He says, "When you get out, please remember me. Tell the Pharaoh that I have been falsely accused. Do everything that you can because I have given you a favorable interpretation. Get me out of this prison."

The last part of chapter 40 ends with the words, ". . . but [the cupbearer] forgot him."

Let us go back, in fact, to Genesis, chapter 40, verse 20a, to set the stage.

Thus it came about on the third day, which was Pharaoh's birthday . . .

Three days after Joseph interpreted the cupbearer's and the baker's dreams in prison, Pharaoh has a birthday. I want to give an interesting side light on this because, if you have been reading the newspaper lately, you have noted that scoffers, and critics, and those of more liberal beliefs are once again attacking the reliability of the scriptures.

You may have noticed the front page of our local newspaper recently, which told that they are determined to tone down the sexist point of view of the scriptures. The implication being that the Word of God is sexist. They are going to change the references of "he" in verses, to "it". I do not know what they are going to do with the masculine references to God, but perhaps they will find a way around that as well.

I think it interesting that critics have often said, "This is proof that the Bible was written by someone long after the time of the Pharaoh because they didn't know anything about birthday parties during the time of Pharaoh."

Yet, it says in verse 20 that Pharaoh is having a birthday party. This is proof that someone living far beyond that time wrote.

It seems as if God, every once in awhile, allows the archeologist's spade to uncover some evidence. Perhaps you have heard of the Rosetta stone that was uncovered which gave the ability to read hieroglyphics. On that Rosetta stone is an entire decree given at the birthday party of a Pharaoh!

Well, it was Pharaoh's birthday party and, according to verses 20b through 23,

. . . he made a feast for all his servants; and he lifted up the head of the chief cupbearer and the head of the chief baker among his servants. He restored the chief cupbearer to his office, and he put the cup into Pharaoh's hand; but he hanged the chief baker, just as Joseph had interpreted to them. Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him.

It had only been three days. When I read this, the first thought that came to my mind was that the cupbearer's memory reminded me of me. Three days! I have a hard time remembering when my wife tells me to pick up a loaf of bread on my way home from work – after only eight hours. So now, when I leave home in the morning, she pins notes to my lapels! But after three days, you would think that he would remember. I looked up each word in the original text, thinking that one of the words would imply he chose to forget, and I could not find it. He did not make up his mind to choose to forget, he simply forgot.

But is that really what was going on behind the scenes? There was a sovereign God who knew that the timing was not right. Joseph still had two more years of preparation before he would step from the prison cell into the office of prime minister. God was not through preparing him. He was making gold out of Joseph.

You may be familiar with Job, chapter 23, verse 10b, when Job wrote that,

. . . when He [God] has tried me, I shall come forth as gold.

That is an internal development. He is not saying that when God is finished, he will get his job back. He is not saying that when God is finished trying him, his spouse might return; he will get promoted; his children will begin to obey. No.

. . . when He has tried me, I shall come forth as gold.

That is an internal development of character that is sterling; that is valuable.

God was, in a sense, in that prison cell for two more years while Joseph had been forgotten. About Joseph's ankles were the fetters, and periodically perhaps, his neck was fettered to a stone column so that he had to stand at attention. What was God doing? Making gold.

I have heard several illustrations recently, that illustrated this point so well. A young soprano was singing in a concert hall to a vast audience. Her range was exquisite and she was obviously trained. The composer of the song she was singing was in the audience. One of his friends leaned over, after she had finished, and asked, "What do you think of that?"

The composer replied, "She will be great one day, after her heart has been broken."

A. W. Tozer wrote the following words. Listen carefully because you might disagree.

It is doubtful that God can use anyone greatly until God has hurt him deeply. There in the prison cell for this two year period, God is, in a sense, hurting, developing, maturing, so that he will come out of that cell ready for the office of prime minister.

The Dreams of Pharaoh

Let us now note, as we head into chapter 41 of Genesis, all that occurs. Look at verses 1 through 8a.

Now it happened at the end of two full years that Pharaoh had a dream, and behold, he was standing by the Nile.

And lo, from the Nile there came up seven cows, sleek and fat; and they grazed in the marsh grass.

Then behold, seven other cows came up after them from the Nile, ugly and gaunt, and they stood by the other cows on the bank of the Nile.

The ugly and gaunt cows ate up the seven sleek and fat cows. Then Pharaoh awoke.

He fell asleep and dreamed a second time; and behold, seven ears of grain came up on a single stalk, plump and good.

Then behold, seven ears, thin and scorched by the east wind, sprouted up after them.

The thin ears swallowed up the seven plump and full ears. Then Pharaoh awoke, and behold, it was a dream.

Now in the morning his spirit was troubled, so he sent and called for all the magicians of Egypt, and all its wise men. And Pharaoh told them his dreams, . . .

Note that these magicians are a collection of the wisest of the wise in Egypt. They are, by the way, the same crowd that Moses will do combat with in the book of Exodus. The title “wise men” could be translated, “well-versed in the writings”. In other words, these men knew all of the writings of Egypt.

These magicians were well versed in the occult. They had powers that are evidenced, especially when Moses fights against them, as they give revelation of Satan’s power in them. These men were very wise in terms of the underworld. They were well trained in interpreting hard sayings and dreams. If anyone could do it, these men could.

When we read these dreams, you and I could probably make an educated guess as to their meaning. It seems that there are good things happening for seven years and then, there are going to be bad things happening for seven years. It makes simple sense to us.

Yet, I think God closed the minds of these wise men. They were not able to tell Pharaoh the meaning. Look at the last part of verse 8.

. . . but there was no one who could interpret them to Pharaoh.

Now look at verse 9. You may remember this character.

Then the chief cupbearer spoke to Pharaoh, saying, “I would make mention today of my own offenses.”

The cupbearer is saying, in a sense, “Uh-oh, I forgot something, Pharaoh, that may be helpful.”

Continue to verses 10 through 13.

“Pharaoh was furious with his servants, and he put me in confinement in the house of the captain of the bodyguard, both me and the chief baker.

“We had a dream on the same night, he and I; each of us dreamed according to the interpretation of his own dream.

“Now a Hebrew youth was with us there, a servant of the captain of the bodyguard, and we related them to him, and he interpreted our dreams for us. To each one he interpreted according to his own dream.

“And just as he interpreted for us, so it happened; he restored me in my office, but he hanged him.”

The Interpretations of Joseph

Now, two years later, God brings to the cupbearer’s mind a remembrance of this Hebrew captive, Joseph. So, we are told in verse 14a,

Then Pharaoh sent and called for Joseph, and they hurriedly brought him out of the dungeon; . . .

They literally forced him to run. He stops, however, and probably understanding whose presence he will be in, decides to dress the part.

And when he had shaved himself and changed his clothes, he came to Pharaoh.

Now look at verse 15.

Pharaoh said to Joseph, “I have had a dream, but no one can interpret it; and I have heard it said about you, that when you hear a dream you can interpret it.”

Stop! Imagine you are Joseph at this moment. You have spent years in prison because you were falsely accused. This is your grand opportunity! This is, in a sense, your day in court. This is your opportunity to vindicate yourself. I think my first words would have been, “If you’ll get me out of prison, I’ll do this.”

Or perhaps if Joseph had been spending that two year period in bitterness, determining that once he was released, there would be revenge, then that would have been the first thing out of his mouth. But look at verse 16. He says these words,

. . . “It is not in me . . .”

In other words, “Pharaoh, it’s not me.”

I want to rush into the courtroom and say, “Joseph, just a minute! Sure it is! God is in you! Take some credit here.”

There was no credit taken by Joseph. He says in verse 16,

“It is not in me; God [Elohim] will give Pharaoh a favorable answer.”

I love this because I can just imagine all of the magicians and all of the wise men filling that court of Egypt. And there that grand Pharaoh sits, and this little Hebrew captive, Joseph, says, “Elohim will tell you.”

As you know, Egypt was a very idolatrous nation. They had myriads of idols; myriads of gods. And

Joseph says, “Elohim, the God of heaven, will reveal it to you.”

Look at verse 17. I think Pharaoh probably ignored Joseph’s statement.

So Pharaoh spoke to Joseph, “In my dream, behold, I was standing on the bank of the Nile;”

Pharaoh tells the story. Let us get to the end of the story and note what happens. Look at verses 25 through 31.

Now Joseph said to Pharaoh, “Pharaoh’s dreams are one and the same; God [Elohim] has told to Pharaoh what He is about to do.

“The seven good cows are seven years; and the seven good ears are seven years; the dreams are one and the same.

“The seven lean and ugly cows that came up after them are seven years, and the seven thin ears scorched by the east wind will be seven years of famine.

“It is as I have spoken to Pharaoh: God has shown to Pharaoh what He is about to do.

“Behold, seven years of great abundance are coming in all the land of Egypt;

“and after them seven years of famine will come, and all the abundance will be forgotten in the land of Egypt; and the famine will ravage the land.

“So the abundance will be unknown in the land because of that subsequent famine; for it will be very severe.”

Joseph’s interpretation is to the point and it is truthful. Perhaps if you had been abducted; perhaps if you had been sold into slavery and falsely accused, you would have added a little “P.S.” to this, “And Pharaoh, I hope Egypt rots. It wouldn’t bother me a bit. Seven good years are coming. Seven bad years are coming too, and you deserve every bit of it.”

Joseph’s advice

However, what will happen next is nothing less than startling. Let us take a look. Joseph says in verse 33,

“Now let Pharaoh look for a man discerning and wise, and set him over the land of Egypt.”

I like the way he adds the word “discerning”. Pharaoh had his “wise” men, but a discerning person is one who can see a problem *and* a solution. Pharaoh had all kinds of people who could say, “Pharaoh, here’s the problem . . . this is the problem,” just as there are those in your life who see the problems, and perhaps you can see problems. A discerning person, however, can provide a solution.

Look at Joseph’s recommended solution in verses 34 through 36.

“Let Pharaoh take action to appoint overseers in charge of the land, and let him exact a fifth of the produce of the land of Egypt in the seven years of abundance.

“Then let them gather all the food of these good years that are coming, and store up the grain for food in the cities under Pharaoh’s authority, and let them guard it.

“Let the food become as a reserve for the land for the seven years of famine which will occur in the land of Egypt, so that the land will not perish during the famine.”

“This is how you can survive, Pharaoh, during the famine.”

Now, I sat back and asked myself, first of all, “Where in the world did Joseph come up with this plan?”

The last time we saw Joseph in freedom, he was overseeing the tending of sheep, as the son of a wandering immigrant in the land. Now, as a thirty year old, he is standing in the court of the Pharaoh and he is saying, “Pharaoh, this is the problem. Now let me give you a three-fold solution.”

Bang! Bang! Bang! He says, “We need:

- a central administration;
- a security system;
- a distribution plan.”

It is fantastic!

The Promotion of Joseph

Pharaoh is probably on his throne thinking, “Wow! I’m going to believe this because he interpreted the dream. But now, where in the world

am I going to find some man who can not only share the problem, but provide the solution.”

Notice what he does in verse 38. He is speaking to the wise men; the magicians.

Then Pharaoh said to his servants, “Can we find a man like this, in whom is a divine spirit?”

He is asking, “. . . in whom dwells the spirit of the gods.” He is not a believer, but he senses something in Joseph that is distinctive. He senses that Joseph’s God is really part of his life. It is more than an idol, it is a reality to him. And his God has given him discernment and wisdom. Oh, that the world could see that in you and in me.

Continue to verses 39 and 40.

So Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Since God has informed you of all this, there is no one so discerning and wise as you are. You shall be over my house, and according to your command all my people shall do homage; only in the throne I will be greater than you.”

Now before we enjoy the promotion, let us broaden our imagination a bit and try to imagine what the rest of the country would think about this. Here is a young upstart, and all of the news will spread as fast as fire, that this servant is now going to become prime minister. You would probably think, as one man that I heard suggested, that he knew someone or bought someone off. No one would know that God was behind the scene. And although Joseph’s plan sounds wonderful to Pharaoh, it would not sound wonderful to you and me. Joseph has suggested that he tax the people one-fifth of their produce for seven years. This is a tax increase. The people are going to ask, “Upon what basis, Pharaoh, have you done this?”

Can you imagine asking our President, as he gets on his plane and heads to Europe to heal a rift in NATO, “Do you have a plan?”

The President would reply, “Yes, I do.”

Then imagine asking him, “Well, upon what basis do you have a plan?”

What would our response be if the President then answered, “Well, I had this dream . . .”

The people of Egypt might say, “Pharaoh, you’re going to raise our taxes. For seven years you’re going to take a fifth. Upon what basis?”

The Pharaoh would respond, “Well, I had a dream and this Hebrew slave told me what it meant.”

We need to understand the tremendous risk in this promotion. Yes, Joseph is prime minister, but I guarantee, he was hated.

Now, let us dive into this from rags to riches story. I love it.

Pharaoh says to his servants, “Let’s find a man.”

Then Pharaoh says to Joseph in verse 39, “There’s nobody like you. Let’s put you over the house.”

Note what Pharaoh does in verses 41 and 42a.

Pharaoh said to Joseph, “See I have set you over all the land of Egypt.” Then Pharaoh took off his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph’s hand, . . .

A signet ring was a symbol of power. It was with this ring that he would stamp into the wax of invoices. It was with this ring that he had the power to buy and sell. It was with this ring that he stood as Pharaoh’s man. He was accountable to no one. Continue to the last part of verse 42.

. . . and clothed him in garments of fine linen and put the gold necklace around his neck.

This was a symbol of his position; this was royalty. Joseph was *the* second in command over all of Egypt!

Application – Joseph’s Greatest Test!

I cannot help but wonder what Joseph thought because just a few hours before, he was scraping food from a tin plate and his feet were shackled. Now, his feet are perhaps being looked after by the best physicians. His prison garb has been taken off and he is dressed in fine clothing. His hands, callused from prison yard work, are now adorned with the signet ring of the Pharaoh. This is his day. Joseph will now ride in a chariot – a gift of the Pharaoh. In front of him will be the slaves who run before the chariot saying, “Iskay, iskay,” or “Bow down, here comes Joseph.”

Every one of us would enjoy being prime minister of Egypt. We would love, in our flesh, to be unaccountable to anyone – never having to ask for time off, for vacation pay, for a raise; never being told to do another job for the rest of our lives. We would

answer to no one – everyone would answer to us. We would be on top.

Yet, ladies and gentlemen, how do you believe Joseph would answer if we were able to ask him, “Joseph, what was the greatest test that you faced?”

“I’ll bet I know – it was when your eleven brothers threw you in the pit and you had to fight the feelings of revenge and bitterness. That was it, wasn’t it?”

He would probably say, “No.”

“Oh, I know, it was Potiphar’s wife and the way she was after you day after day, and you had to ward off her advances. That was the greatest test, wasn’t it?”

I doubt it. I believe, the greatest test Joseph faced was prosperity. The position that he now has. The authority that was now in his office.

Why is it that prosperity is a tremendous test? It is a test that you and I face living in our culture today. We live in a “give me” type of culture that is always after more. And we have more; we have so much. I think we are not aware that the test is laid at our feet. Why is it so dangerous that we prosper? Why is it that one man would write, “While a hundred men can stand adversity, only one can stand prosperity.”?

What is it about our natures that cannot handle the pampering, and yet we want it? What is it about our flesh, our relationship with Christ, that cannot handle when we are really on top and are unaccountable? Why does God not want that?

Two reasons prosperity is such a great test

Let me give you two reasons why prosperity is such a great test. You may want to write these down.

Prosperity tends to eliminate faith

1. First, prosperity tends to eliminate faith.

Turn to the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 8. This was the warning to the children of Israel. It is a warning that you and I must remind ourselves of constantly. He says, in verse 11a of chapter 8,

“Beware that you do not forget the Lord your God by not keeping His commandments and His ordinances . . .”

The children of Israel at this point, are on the edge of the land. If they had not disobeyed they would have

entered. He gives this warning, in verses 12 through 18.

“otherwise, when you have eaten and are satisfied, and have built good houses and lived in them,

“and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and gold multiply, and all that you have multiplies,

“then your heart becomes proud and you will forget the Lord your God . . .

“He led you through the great and terrible wilderness, with its fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty ground where there was no water; He brought water for you out of the rock of flint.

“In the wilderness He fed you manna which your fathers did not know, that He might humble you and that He might test you, to do good for you in the end.

“Otherwise, you may say in your heart, ‘My power and the strength of my hand made me this wealth.’

“But you shall remember the Lord your God, for it is He who is giving you power to make wealth . . .”

These are powerful words.

It seems that when you and I are in need, we remember God. We go to Him more in prayer at such times. We pray, “Lord, how are we going to make this payment? Give us wisdom.”

There is something precious about adversity. Why? Because it engenders faith in God; it does not allow us to forget Him.

Do you know one of the most exciting things, men and women, about being a part of this church right now? It is that we do not have much in terms of material wealth. It would be hard to forget God because for each step, we must pray, “God give us wisdom.”

We are looking for the miracles. We are watching His hand. It is primitive. We are at the beginning. But beware of the prosperity; beware of the advancement. I would imply to beware when we no longer put out folding chairs or meet in a dirty room in the back for Sunday school. Beware when we have so much.

As a church, I challenge us, as we look forward to prosperity, to take stock now. Also in our individual lives, when you and I prosper, we tend to forget God.

The elimination of faith weakens character

2. The second reason that prosperity is such a great test is that not only does prosperity eliminate faith, but the elimination of faith weakens character.

When faith is eliminated, character is weakened. It is the hard time that develops the iron in the blood, the toughness of moral character.

Look at another passage. Go all the way to the other end of the Bible, to Revelation, chapter 3. Take note of a church where this happened and let it be a warning to us, not only individually, but corporately. Look at verses 14 through 17a.

To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God, says this:

“I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot.

“So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth.

“Because you say, ‘I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,’ . . .”

What is the result of an attitude that says, “I don’t need anything; I have everything. God has prospered me.”

We have forgotten God. Then what happens? Our characters become tepid and we lose our effectiveness. We are lukewarm.

The elimination of faith, ultimately, produces a weakened character that, ultimately, denies the potential of an effective ministry.

How do we know that Joseph did not forget God?

How do we know, men and women, from Genesis, chapter 41, that Joseph did not forget God during the prosperous years? How do we know? I am going to give you a very clear reason.

Notice the names that Joseph gives to his sons. To make Joseph more palatable to the Egyptian

culture, Pharaoh wisely gives him an Egyptian name and gives him an Egyptian wife – both of which, he accepts. Joseph, however, has two sons that he is determined to raise according to his “old country” values. We are told in verse 51,

Joseph named the firstborn Manasseh, “For,” he said, “God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father’s household.”

Joseph has a second son and, according to verse 52,

He named the second Ephraim, “For,” he said, “God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction.”

How do we know that Joseph did not forget God? When he had two boys, he named them in honor of his God, Elohim – “God has done this . . .”. In fact, that runs through the entire chapter of Joseph’s life. As he prospers, “God . . . God . . . God . . .!” is on the tip of his tongue.

“Joseph, you’re really something!”

“God did it.”

“What a plan you came up with, Joseph!”

“God did it.”

I think if someone in our day, perhaps us, went back and lived in that kind of situation and became the prime minister, they would probably write a book and entitle it, *From Prisoner to Prime Minister, And How I Did It In Two Short Years*. Joseph took absolutely no credit.

What was the key to passing the prosperity test?

Let me ask another question, by way of application. What was the key to Joseph passing this test?

It was this: Joseph was careful to respect the glory of God, the place of God, and the authority of God.

Between the two extremes of adversity and prosperity, there is one little word – integrity. It is that character that acknowledges God. It takes no credit for itself; it yields it all to God. It never looks in the mirror and admires itself; it gives all of the honor to God. Joseph had integrity.

Conclusion

What happened to Joseph's interpretation of Pharaoh's dream? It came true. Look at verses 53 and 54.

When the seven years of plenty which had been in the land of Egypt came to an end, and the seven years of famine began to come, just as Joseph had said, then there was famine in all the lands; but in all the land of Egypt there was bread.

Let me add a footnote to this. As I have mentioned in previous discussions, Joseph is a type of Jesus Christ. There are perhaps, more than a hundred illustrations of this. Joseph's Egyptian name, many believe, means, "Savior of the world". It is interesting, as famine comes to the land, note what happens, according to verse 55,

So when all the land of Egypt was famished, the people cried out to Pharaoh for bread; and Pharaoh said to all the Egyptians, "Go to Joseph . . ."

I love that! There is a famine in the land today. What is our answer? "Go to Jesus Christ. *He* can feed you; *He* can provide nourishment."

Perhaps you are listening today and there is a famine in your soul. You have never come to the Savior of the world. Go to Him.

I would imagine, at this point in Joseph's life, he could have sat back, stuck his thumbs in his lapels, and said, "See, I told you so. It happened, just like I said."

However, Joseph is beyond that now – because God had hurt him deeply, God had broken him, God had formed him. So now, as prime minister, he has the same character that he had when he was a prisoner. He is not putting on airs; he is not sticking up his nose at the peons out there. He is still compassionate; he is still caring.

Something wonderful has happened in Joseph's life. God has created gold. Gold is a quality of character so pure. Gold is a quality of character that, in Joseph's day and today, is in great demand. And it is so rare.

Do you have it? Do you acknowledge the glory of God? Do you give Him the honor and the praise for everything that transpires – even when you prosper? The world will be quick to notice, just as they noticed in Joseph's day. And, ultimately, they will come for an answer. Then, you can point them to the Savior of the world and say, "Go to Jesus."

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