

Sermon 5th September 2021: Genesis Chapter 41 v 41 to 52

During this summer we have been looking at some of the personalities that are sometimes very familiar to us from the Bible and what we can learn from being human in a God centred world. For each of these we have looked at what have they done in their own story and experience, what has God doing in all this and what does it tell us about being human and what a God shaped world could look like for us.

Today I would like to look at the experience of Joseph and his experience in standing up for God under some very trying experiences.

We all love stories in which the underdog wins. The story of Joseph is one such story when a prisoner becomes second-in-command of all of Egypt.

Remember Joseph's suffering and humiliation? He was thrown into a pit by his brothers and then sold as a slave. Once in Egypt he was falsely charged with attempted rape and again thrown into a pit; this time he had shackles that limited his movement. When the king's cupbearer and baker were thrown into prison, Joseph was assigned to attend to their needs as though he were a lowly servant. After this, even though Joseph correctly interpreted his dream, the cupbearer forgot Joseph so Joseph spent two more years in the pit. In all of this unjust suffering we see Joseph standing up for his principles.

By the power and grace of God, only Joseph was able to interpret Pharaoh's dream. Joseph told Pharaoh of seven years of plenty followed by seven years of severe famine. According to Joseph, "the matter has been firmly decided by God, and God will do it soon". The message is that God is in charge. He is controlling events. He is revealing that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and lean years, food and drink, health and sickness, prosperity and poverty come to us not by chance but from His fatherly hand.

But, now, how does Joseph respond to the providence of God? Does he sit back and do nothing? Does he say, "Whatever Will Be, Will Be"? Joseph suggests a plan to Pharaoh so Egypt will not perish. Rescue was possible for Pharaoh and his people if only they listened to God's word through Joseph. Joseph was not a fatalist, and he did not end his speech to Pharaoh saying, "Famine is coming and we cannot stop it. Let us hope for the best." Instead, he laid out a plan: store up food during the seven years of plenty for the seven years of famine.

Here is a reminder that Biblical Christianity yes, we believe in the providence of God. Yes, we believe God has a plan. Yes, we believe God ordains all things. But we also believe that God's declarations require action on our part especially worship, repentance, prayer, and holiness. And, in the case of Egypt, store up food during the seven years of plenty for the seven years of famine.

We see that Joseph's combination of warning and wisdom pleases Pharaoh greatly. The wisdom of Joseph's words is so clear that the king of Egypt recognizes the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Pharaoh immediately pays attention to Joseph's counsel. He agrees to place a man in charge of famine relief and chooses Joseph for this task. What happens next is totally unexpected:

So Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I hereby put you in charge of the whole land of Egypt." (42) Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his finger and put it on Joseph's finger. He dressed him in robes of fine linen and put a gold chain around his neck. (43) He had him ride in a chariot as his second-in-command, and men shouted before him, "Make way!" Thus he put him in charge of the whole land of Egypt.

Joseph is given all the trappings of royalty: Pharaoh's signet ring, fine clothing, jewellery, and a chariot. Joseph becomes second-in-command next to Pharaoh.

As I said, this is totally unexpected. But after years of faithfulness in little things serving Potiphar, managing the prison, and attending Pharaoh's officials Joseph is finally given authority over much. But didn't Jesus say this is the way it is in the Kingdom of heaven: "You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things" (Mt 25:23).

Joseph was granted all this because he relied on the Lord and was empowered by the Spirit.

Take a step back with me for a moment and look at the whole picture. Do you remember how Joseph ended up in prison? Mrs. Potiphar was annoyed that she couldn't seduce Joseph. A woman rejected in love can be very angry and dangerous. We have an expression, "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned." So Mrs. Potiphar trumped up evil charges against Joseph. As for Potiphar, he believed his wife without bothering to find out the facts for himself. He took it for granted that his wife was a modest and virtuous woman, and condemning Joseph as a wicked man, he threw him into prison.

The Bible doesn't tell us, but I was wondering how the Potiphar family reacted to the exaltation of Joseph? They certainly knew that it was Joseph who now was in control of Egypt after all, Potiphar was the captain of Pharaoh's guard and it appears Joseph was in Potiphar's prison. Scripture doesn't idly give us little details like this.

We look at the humiliation and exaltation of Joseph and we see the humiliation and exaltation of Jesus. Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel to conspire against Jesus and condemned Him to death. But death and humiliation did not have the last word because Jesus rose, ascended into

heaven, and was seated at God's right hand. Listen to how Christ's exaltation is described in the hymn of Christ in Philippians:

(Phil 2:9-11) Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, (10) that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, (11) and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Do you see the similarities between Jesus and Joseph? Like Jesus, Joseph suffered humiliation and unjust suffering. Like Jesus, the rejection and persecution of men was used by God to save. And, like Jesus, Joseph was exalted to the highest place; he was given a name above other names; before him every knee shall bow (the Hebrew for "Make way!" can also be translated "Bend the knee!"); and, every tongue was to confess his greatness. We see that Joseph has had a very similar experience to Jesus.

The first promise of salvation, in Genesis 3:15, states that the Messiah, and in Him all believers, will crush Satan's head and have final victory over evil. We see our promised victory displayed in the life of Joseph.

We may not all receive public exaltation and vindication in this life, as Joseph did. But we all will be exalted on the last day when our perishable body is raised in glory, finally free from all sin and sickness and death. That's the promise of God for you and me in the story of Joseph.

Have you noticed that every significant change in Joseph's life involved a change of clothing. Father Jacob gave Joseph a beautiful coat, but his brothers stripped it off him and used his garment to deceive his father. Similarly, Potiphar's wife stripped Joseph of his garment and used it to deceive his master. When Joseph was summoned by Pharaoh, the text notes that he first changed his clothes. And, when Pharaoh put Joseph in charge of Egypt, he gave him robes of fine linen. In the same way, in Christ we also have a change of clothing: our rags of sin are exchanged for Christ's robes of righteousness. And, at the wedding supper of the Lamb and His bride, those who are faithful will be given fine linen, bright and clean, to wear.

A Joseph was exalted. Just like the Lord Jesus Christ, he went from rags to riches. Just like the Lord Jesus Christ, the underdog wins. "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone".

Even in the Bible we see that success can often be a curse. For example, Gideon and Solomon were lead astray when theirs became fame and position. Yet, Joseph remained faithful to the Lord. Joseph did not allow success to keep him from bearing witness to the Lord.

When he was a young man Joseph boasted about his dreams and their interpretation. But before Pharaoh Joseph was careful to say dreams and their

interpretation are from God. Joseph turned attention away from himself and to God. Joseph gave all the glory to God. This evidently made an impression upon Pharaoh. Why do I say that? Because of the Egyptian name Pharaoh gave to Joseph: Zaphenath-Paneah (Gen 41:45). The name means, "God has spoken, and He lives." By this name a pagan king acknowledged that our God is a living god in contrast to the idols of the heathen and He is the source of revelation.

Pharaoh also gave Joseph an Egyptian wife. He was married to Asenath, the daughter of Potiphera, priest of On. So what, you may say? This means Joseph was married into the family that led the worship of the sun-god Ra. So, Joseph was married into a pagan family. Yet it may be the Lord used this marriage to convert Joseph's wife to the worship of Himself. Though far from conclusive, Philo, a first-century Jewish philosopher who lived in Egypt, mentions a story in which Asenath turns to God.

There is clear biblical evidence that Joseph maintained a strong witness to the one, only, true God. In our Bible reading today we see the birth of Joseph's sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. Joseph was given an Egyptian name but he made sure his sons had Hebrew names. Their names prove Joseph's continued awareness of the Lord's presence with him in the land of Egypt. Any time the Egyptians would ask Joseph to explain the names of his boys, he could testify to the Almighty. Notably, the name "Manasseh" means "God has made me forget all my trouble."

Lastly, Joseph also bore witness to the Lord through his work ethic. We are told Joseph "travelled throughout Egypt. He collected food produced in the seven years of abundance and stored it up for the seven years of famine. Think about all the arrangements that had to be made. Joseph needed storage facilities. He needed to negotiate with the farmers as prices fell due to the huge surpluses. He needed agents to buy the grain. He needed workers to guard the grain from thieves and rats and mould. He needed a distribution method to bring the grain from the countryside into the cities. He needed the cooperation of the farmers and the priests and Pharaoh's officials. What a lot of work. But Joseph not only did it, he did it well so Egypt was prepared when the famine came.

We are told that Joseph was able to gather up a tremendous store of grain it was like the sand of the sea; it was so much that he stopped keeping records because it was beyond measure. There was so much that "all the countries came to Egypt to buy grain". Through Joseph, then, God blessed the world. Through Joseph God confirmed His promise to Abraham that "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" though, of course, this promise is especially fulfilled in Christ.

At the start of Genesis 41 Joseph was in prison. At the end of Genesis 41 Joseph was second-in-command of all of Egypt. By the grace and power and plan of God the underdog was given a great and glorious victory. So, we turn from Joseph and to Christ.

So what can we learn from these experiences? Well no matter what happened to Joseph as a younger man, he never seems to bear a grudge or injustice. He was obedient to what God wanted him to do and use his spiritual gifts, in his case interpreting dreams. He was able to use his gifts in managing his work to the Glory of God. And by doing this successfully his was given more responsibility. In doing this he never claimed his own glory or success, but that of God.

I have been very fortunate in life in my career as an engineer. It has and continues to be a very interesting role involved in major projects throughout my career. What I can say is that God has never allowed me to do a project or make a decision that he has not prepared me for. But in making those decisions I always give God the credit. I can openly put my hand up and say I have participated in meetings asking God, what I am doing here. Well Lord, I need your help to get through this. He has never let me down.

So for many people they may work through life and think they are the ones in charge, making the key decisions. If you are in a God centred world you can have Jesus on your side and you never need to be alone when you feel under pressure or cannot do this. He will guide you through those difficult times and you can give him the glory he deserves.

At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow,
every tongue confess him King of glory now;
'tis the Father's pleasure we should call him Lord,
who from the beginning was the mighty Word.