

Week 3 – Successful Suffering – Genesis 39:1-23

Scripture Reading: Psalm 105:7-19

Introduction

I believe it would be quite safe to say everyone wants to succeed

Wouldn't you agree?

Everyone wants to succeed – that just seems obvious – but not everyone defines success in the same way

For some success is to amass lots of money or things – the “he who dies with the most toys, wins” philosophy

For some success means to gain a position of power or status – to have outsized influence with other people

We spoke last week about how we live in a culture of personality these days and for many being popular is how they measure success – even if that only means having lots of followers and getting a lot of likes on social media

For others it might mean living a life of service to others while for others it might mean living a life filled with pursuits that bring them personal pleasure

But, however a person defines it, success by definition means achieving a goal of some kind

As you can see, I've titled this morning's sermon, “Successful Suffering” and that's kind of an oxymoron because we don't normally combine those two ideas and it's odd to think of someone who is suffering being considered a success

When we left off last week Joseph's brothers had sold him to some Midianite traders who had transported him to Egypt and sold him to a man named Potiphar who was “*an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard*”

And I think most people would agree at this point in his life Joseph would probably not be considered a rip-roaring success

No one that I have ever met has told me their life's goal is to be a slave in Egypt and if they could just achieve that; they would consider themselves to be a success

No! We consider slaves to be anything but prosperous or successful

Nevertheless, we see in this chapter that God's Word declares not just once but **seven times** that Joseph was a success first as a slave and then, as if being a slave isn't bad enough, as a slave in prison

Clearly, we may need to reorient our thinking regarding what it means to be successful

If you haven't already done so, please turn in your Bible to Genesis 39 (page 33)

Genesis 39 tells us about Joseph's time in Potiphar's household and the account fits neatly into three acts

First, in verses 1-6, we see Joseph as a slave who rises to a place of prominence in Potiphar's household and in this section we see Joseph demonstrate success over **sloth** (or laziness)

Then, in verses 7-18 we read about his encounter with Potiphar's wife and how Joseph demonstrated success over **temptation**

And then, in verses 19-23, we see Joseph unjustly cast into prison and how he demonstrated success over **despair**

Those are the fill-in-the-blanks on your note sheet by the way: sloth, temptation, and despair

Let's begin by looking at verses 1-6 (**Genesis 39:1-6a**)

Now Joseph had been brought down to Egypt, and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, had bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there. The Lord was with Joseph, and he became a successful man, and he was in the house of his Egyptian master. His master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord caused all that he did to succeed in his hands. So Joseph found favor in his sight and attended him, and he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had. From the time that he made him overseer in his house and over all that he had, the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; the blessing of the Lord was on all that he had, in house and field. So he left all that he had in Joseph's charge, and because of him he had no concern about anything but the food he ate.

I. Success Over Sloth

Try to put yourself in Joseph's place and consider what you would be experiencing

You are 17-years old and without warning you have gone from being your father's favorite child and chosen heir to being betrayed by your older brothers who wanted you dead but settled for selling you to a band of Ishmaelite traders

After a long journey you have arrived in Egypt – a country to which you have never been only to be surrounded by a different language, dress, customs, foods, and so forth

And you no sooner got to Egypt that you are immediately sold to another man and put to work as a menial slave

Imagine your thoughts and feelings and think of what your response would be to all of this

Of course, you would undoubtedly be afraid, but I suspect there would also be some anger involved too

You would almost certainly be thinking ill of your brothers for treating you so badly and you might well even be mad at God for the injustices that you were suffering

You would likely be depressed and forlorn; homesick and more than a little bewildered as to how you had come to be here and worried about what was to become of you

How do you think you would respond? What would you do in this situation?

Most of us would probably begin by complaining about the injustice that was done to us by man and God and for the difficult circumstances we found ourselves in

Of course we would have to complain silently to ourselves or to God because no one around us could understand us

We might be prone to wallowing in self-pity for a while thinking that our situation was hopeless

I think there would also be the tendency to be resentful and to do as little as possible for as long as possible

After all, it would be relatively easy to feign ignorance when you don't know the language and just simply not get things done or to do them slowly or badly

But rather than do any of those things, it seems Joseph threw himself into the work before him

We know that because **verse 2** tells us that Joseph "became a successful man" and the only way to be successful is to do something

No one ever became successful without expending some amount of effort toward a goal

And yet, it wasn't Joseph's hard work, or even his attitude, that caused him to be successful

It was the fact that "*the Lord was with him*" and it was the Lord who "*caused all that he did to succeed*"

So often we block God's blessings in our lives because of our outlook and our unwillingness to work

And it can't be denied that Joseph's attitude and effort had to be right but it was God who blessed him

Actually, the fact that Joseph was the beneficiary of divine blessing was evident to others

Even Potiphar, who no doubt owned many slaves and commanded even more men, noticed that Joseph was successful beyond what human industry and ingenuity would normally yield

Potiphar was a pagan who most likely knew nothing at all about Jehovah – at best he might have faithfully worshipped one or more of the plurality of gods worshipped in Egypt but our text says he acknowledged Jehovah

And that tells me a couple of things:

First, it tells me that Joseph wasn't shy about talking about the God he served and with giving him the credit for his success

Second, it tells me that Joseph lived in such a way that his life was a credit to God – so much so that it caused his pagan owner to invite him into his home and to trust him with all aspects of his life and business

Actually, we see in verse 6 that Joseph lived a life of such integrity that Potiphar only had to concern himself with the food he ate and he left all other details of his life to Joseph – and he was abundantly blessed because of Joseph

In fact, it could be said that Joseph's success was really the fact that Potiphar was blessed because Joseph at this point hasn't exactly been all that prosperous

Because, while he *has* advanced within the ranks of the slaves to being the manager and overseer of his master's affairs he is still a slave in spite of all that

So, why did Joseph do what he did? Was it for Potiphar's sake?

I'm sure it was in part but I don't think that pleasing Potiphar was Joseph's first concern

Rather, I think he was first seeking to please God and we see that he won God's approval and favor before he won the approval and favor of Potiphar

The truth is, we don't know how long it took before Potiphar noticed Joseph and the success he was having

We know that Joseph was 17-years old when he was sold into slavery – we saw that in **Genesis 37:2**

And we know that he was 30-years old when he entered Pharaoh's service – we see that in **Genesis 41:46**

And we know that he had been in prison for two years when Pharaoh had his dreams and called for Joseph to come from the prison to interpret them

That means that Joseph was a slave in Potiphar's household for 11 years before he was thrown into prison

Some scholars believe that Potiphar actually moved Joseph from where the slaves were quartered into his own home when he made him his overseer

And, based on the text, it would seem that Potiphar's wife moved rather quickly and began to seduce Joseph almost immediately after he was promoted and moved into the house that she shared with her husband

And that makes a certain amount of sense because it seems somewhat unlikely that Potiphar's wife would pay much attention to any one of what was probably a great number of her husband's slaves

But a slave that lived in the same house with her; particularly a good looking, young slave who was quite different from everyone else around her would be hard to overlook for long

I say all of that to make the point that Joseph wasn't an overnight success – it appears most likely he labored as a loyal slave for close to 11 years before Potiphar took notice of him to promote him

We have the tendency to believe that God will bless us quickly if we are doing his will and in our "hurry up society" we have a hard time waiting for what we want or for what we think we deserve

The way our text reads it seems as though Joseph was an overnight success story when the reality is he endured for what we would consider a long, long time as a common slave before he was promoted

God often keeps his children in uncomfortable positions for an extended time and by doing so teaches us perseverance and patience as he refines them and prepares them for some future need

And since pleasing God was Joseph's first priority, he persisted in doing that until God's blessing on his life was noticed and he received the favor of Potiphar

Man's approval and blessing are always great things to have but the Christian must strive first of all to please God and trust that in doing so that the favor of man will follow

Because in reality, there are times when we can't possibly please both man and God and when those situations arise we must firmly determine to please God and trust him to work out the consequences

And that's something that Joseph is about to learn as we see next

Look with me at verses 6b-18 (**Genesis 39:6b-18**) where we see the attempted seduction of Joseph by Potiphar's wife and the unjust results it brings to Joseph

Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance. And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, "Lie with me." But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Behold, because of me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my charge. He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except you, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" And as she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not listen to her, to lie beside her or to be with her.

But one day, when he went into the house to do his work and none of the men of the house was there in the house, she caught him by his garment, saying, "Lie with me." But he left his garment in her hand and fled and got out of the house. And as soon as she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled out of the house, she called to the men of her household and said to them, "See, he has brought among us a Hebrew to laugh at us. He came in to me to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice. And as soon as he heard that I lifted up my voice and cried out, he left his garment beside me and fled and got out of the house." Then she laid up his garment by her until his master came home, and she told him the same story, saying, "The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought among us, came in to me to laugh at me. But as soon as I lifted up my voice and cried, he left his garment beside me and fled out of the house."

II. Success Over Temptation

I feel kind of bad for Potiphar with the way his wife is describe here – I mean, she was a piece of work!

It seems that there was no stopping her

She was **covetous** – the way **verse 7** reads it seems that as soon as she laid eyes on Joseph her mind was made up

She was also **shameless** – she just boldly demanded Joseph have sex with her because she liked his looks

We may talk about women's liberation and the sexual revolution as if they are new things but Potiphar's wife was ahead of her time and there was no beating around the bush with her – she just put what she wanted right out there

And then in **verses 10-12** we see that she was **persistent** and a **schemer**

She pestered Joseph repeatedly and it appears she even arranged things so that she would be alone with Joseph

Then we see she went beyond words as she took action and physically grabbed Joseph by his coat and tried to drag him into her bed

What a strong temptation her advances had to have been for Joseph

After all, he was somewhere around 28-years old and her demands exploited and sought to pervert a natural, God-given appetite

Typically, the veneer of propriety is very thin and one doesn't have to travel very far from their day-to-day life to see it begin to crack and even disappear

That's why so many young people today fall into sin when they leave their parents' home and go to college

Joseph was a long way from home in both time and distance and he could have reasoned, "I'm a young guy and I deserve some happiness. After all, as they say, when in Rome do as the Romans do..."

Joseph also had to consider who it was that was after him – Potiphar's wife was an important woman in his life

He had to know that, as his master's wife, she could be a valuable ally if she was pleased or she could be a formidable foe if she wasn't – a fact that we see all too plainly when he finally and definitively spurns her advances

It was a serious temptation also because it was repeated day after day as we saw in **verse 10**

Resisting temptation is hard but continuing to resist while under relentless assault is exponentially harder

Eventually, it's possible for even a very strong person to be worn down when the temptation keeps coming

Joseph was also in a very vulnerable place since he had just been promoted

Satan delights in attacking us just when we've finally realized a goal because we have the tendency to let our guard down – so we need to be especially attuned to temptation whenever we reach a milestone of achievement

And then, lastly, Joseph was exposed to great danger because Potiphar's wife had arranged things so no one else need know about their illicit affair

The temptation to sin was very strong but Joseph had success over it – and how he did is instructive for us today

The first thing we notice is that Joseph had a clear understanding of sin and when it appeared he called it by its name

In **verse 9** we see him ask, *“How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?”*

He didn’t beat around the bush and call it something more benign and we need to do likewise

I believe one of our greatest weaknesses today is that we don’t have a proper view of sin – we don’t see it as God does

We tend to call sins by many innocuous sounding pet names and think that our little sins are relatively harmless

But God takes all sin seriously and all sin is equally grievous to him

And the first, best way to defeat any temptation to sin is to recognize it and call it what it is

The second method Joseph used to defeat temptation was to recognize that sin has damaging effects

Notice how he tries to rebuff her advances by stating how much Potiphar had done for him

Joseph knew well that he only had the position he did because of Potiphar’s trust so he owed Potiphar his loyalty

He further stated that Potiphar had put everything under his authority except for Mrs. Potiphar

And he reminded her that she was a married woman with the implication being that she also had a moral obligation to Potiphar

Joseph clearly saw that to have sexual relations with Potiphar’s wife would harm not just him but also Potiphar and his wife

We don’t tend to like that reality

We want desperately to believe that there is such a thing as harmless sin where no one gets hurt

But that simply isn’t the case – lives are damaged and sometimes destroyed even when the effects aren’t immediately seen – **Write this down: There is no such thing as victimless sin** – all sin does damage even if it takes time for it to show

Then, perhaps most importantly, Joseph saw sin as an offense against God

We tend to presume on God a great deal and we treat him as a loving grandpa who will always overlook our faults and tell us we’re okay no matter what we do

God does forgive but it’s really kind of telling when we see in the Old Testament that there was no sacrifice of atonement for willful sin – only for accidental sin or sins of ignorance (Numbers 15:27-31)

If you read Genesis 38, which I skipped over in this sermon series, you saw how God at times had enough of a person’s sin and took their lives as he did with Judah’s two sons, Er and Onan

And God has not changed – while he is patient with us each sin is an offense against him and we see in **1John 5** that there is still sin that leads to death and I believe that can be an accumulation of sin as well as a specific sin

Clearly, Joseph’s desire was to be faithful to his earthly master and he wanted to protect everyone involved but he also wanted to be found faithful to God

So he tried reasoning with Potiphar’s wife, then he tried avoiding her, and finally he removed himself from the situation by actually running away from her

And it cost him – at least in earthly terms

They say “hell hath no fury like a woman scorned” and that pretty much describes Potiphar’s wife’s reaction to Joseph’s rejection

First, she raised a ruckus that brought the other slaves running and told them her tale of how Joseph had tried to rape her

I want you to notice how she spoke of her husband to the slaves – it speaks volumes about their relationship as she blamed Potiphar for Joseph’s presence

And she exaggerated the story by including everyone in her injury saying Joseph's intent was to make sport of them all
Then she laid her "proof" beside her and waited for her husband to return home and when he did she related the same story to him

Potiphar's wife had relentlessly pursued Joseph and now she ruthlessly turned on him

When her unbridled passion for Joseph threatened to get her into trouble, it became just as strong against him and she didn't care at all what happened to him as a result

Joseph's fate is revealed for us in the next section as Potiphar reacts to his wife's story

Look with me at verses 19-20 (**Genesis 39:19-20**)

As soon as his master heard the words that his wife spoke to him, "This is the way your servant treated me," his anger was kindled. And Joseph's master took him and put him into the prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined, and he was there in prison.

Frankly, I don't think Potiphar believed things had happened the way his wife said

I doubt very much that she had always been a faithful wife because of the openly relentless way she went after Joseph and the way she spoke about her husband to the slaves

Besides, the Egyptian rulers weren't exactly squeamish about dealing with wrongdoers

Normally, anyone guilty of Joseph's crime would have been summarily put to death – especially if they were a slave

But Potiphar only had Joseph put in prison and not just any prison but the prison where the king's prisoners were confined which, presumably, would have much better conditions than the general prison

Still, Joseph found himself locked up in the king's prison just as things appeared to be going his way

It would be difficult not to just give in to despair – after all, if this is what serving God and doing right gets you; he might well ask, why be good?

But that wasn't Joseph as we see next he has success over despair

Look with me at verses 21-23 (**Genesis 39:21-23**)

But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison. And the keeper of the prison put Joseph in charge of all the prisoners who were in the prison. Whatever was done there, he was the one who did it. The keeper of the prison paid no attention to anything that was in Joseph's charge, because the Lord was with him. And whatever he did, the Lord made it succeed.

III. Success Over Despair

Joseph was in prison but he wasn't there alone as we see *"the Lord was with Joseph"*

In spite of everything, Joseph still had a consciousness of the presence of God and the comfort knowledge that brings

He was being treated most unfairly but still he didn't ever doubt that God was right there holding him up

And so, even as Joseph is unjustly confined to prison, it's difficult to look at his situation and imagine that he was in the depths of despair or that his confidence in God was broken

When I picture Joseph in prison my mind naturally goes to Acts 16 when Paul and Silas were in jail in Philippi

And how, after having been beaten and with their feet fastened into stocks, they were still praying and singing hymns to God confident that he was there with them

In the example of these three men we see the secret to success in the midst of what everyone else would see as failure – remaining secure in the knowledge that God is present even in the worst circumstances and acting with confidence

No way was Joseph pitching a fit or moaning and groaning about his situation with his head in his hands

Rather it seems he looked around his new surroundings and got busy serving where he was because he knew that God was there with him

And, once again, we see that the Lord *"showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison"*

I can't help but wonder if Potiphar didn't give Joseph a good reference

After all, he might well have been in charge of the prison and, if so, the jailer would have been under his command

And Potiphar had just been forced to lock up the best manager he had ever had – he likely recognized that his own prosperity was in jeopardy once Joseph stopped running things

But what else could he do?

Even if Joseph had protested his innocence, which we have no indication he did, how could Potiphar take the word of a Hebrew slave over his own wife's testimony?

And there was no way to disprove his wife's story even if he had been so inclined

So he had no other choice but to punish Joseph but that didn't mean he had to punish him to the fullest extent and we have to recognize God's sovereign hand of protection was on Joseph even as he was cast into prison

Without a doubt, Joseph was treated unjustly, but we see that he maintained his good attitude and industry as the jailer put him in charge of all the other prisoners just as Potiphar had put him in charge of all his affairs

And the jailer enjoyed the same results as Potiphar as he got to take it easy and watch the Lord make everything that Joseph did succeed

So we see that whether Joseph was a menial slave, an elevated slave, or a prisoner, God made him successful in his suffering because Joseph kept his mind and heart on God and thus made himself a conduit for God's blessing of others through him

Conclusion

I have to admit that I was convicted by Joseph's example this week and I realized I have some work to do in regard to how I face setbacks and difficulties

One commentator I read this week said, "There is scarcely anything in the Christian life which reveals more thoroughly what our Christianity is worth than the way we meet difficulties by the use of the grace of God."

Ouch!

No matter what happened Joseph is shown to have maintained the right attitude which led to his success

As a slave he was reliable, in temptation he was resolute, and as a prisoner he was resilient

We're blessed because we have the record of Joseph's example and how he decidedly determined to rely on God's goodness and sovereignty in his life

And we can study his life and see how he was able to endure the grossest indignities and injustices

The secret to Joseph's success was continually acting in the consciousness of the presence of God

Because he never lost sight of God's presences with him in all circumstances he didn't meet the things he suffered with fretful murmuring, indignant defenses, passionate complaining, or a downcast spirit

And in not allowing those feelings to exercise their influence to weaken him, he maintained his spiritual strength to take on every challenge and he kept himself available to be used by God – and he was powerfully used wherever he was

Everyone noticed that there was something different about Joseph and gave God the credit and prospered as God blessed them through Joseph

We need to live in such a way that our lives cause everyone around us, including the hardest unbelievers, to say, "The Lord is truly with them" regardless of our outward circumstances

And we cannot be dismayed when the Lord takes us to dismal places because lights shine the brightest in the darkness and it's in the slave quarters and dungeons of life where we can show best how we truly feel about God

Like I said, I was convicted by Joseph's example and perhaps you were too

I hope that you will join me in seeking the true success of having God's abundant blessing in your life in whatever circumstances or difficulties we face in order that we might be an example and a blessing to the world around us

Let's pray