

Week 5 – From Prisoner to Prime Minister – Genesis 41:1-57

Scripture Reading: Deuteronomy 8:11-20

Introduction

Have you ever dreamed about winning the lottery?

I think most of us, even if we've never bought a lottery ticket in our lives, have considered what it would be like to become an instant multi-millionaire

And, believe it or not, your odds of winning the lottery are only very slightly reduced by buying a ticket

Still, people buy lottery tickets and dream of sailing smoothly through the rest of their lives if only they should win

But, sadly, that isn't the outcome for many lottery winners

Because, instead of making their lives better, sudden success actually serves to reveal the kind of people they truly are and nothing changes except for the removal of financial limits on their behavior

A casual internet search quickly reveals the sad tales of fortunes squandered on intemperate living; friendships and families destroyed by greed, marriages dissolved, and even suicides all because of realizing instant success

Rather than alleviating problems and smoothing over rough spots, instant success has a way of amplifying whatever is already present

When I coached girls' softball I found it was usually more difficult to get the girls to be good winners than it was to get them to be good losers

After all, they had worked hard and performed well so they deserved to feel good when they scored a victory

But their natural instinct to celebrate could easily get out of hand and turn into an insulting display of pridefulness if not moderated

See, winning revealed something about their characters that losing didn't – the tendency to elevate themselves and to demean their opponents

Because, while they had been taught how to lose graciously since they were small, no one had told them how to win graciously so they were prone to behaving foolishly

When we left Joseph last week he was in prison waiting for Pharaoh's cupbearer to fulfill his promise to remember Joseph to Pharaoh – only we were told that the cupbearer had "forgotten" Joseph

And as we pick up the account this morning in Genesis 41, we see that two years have elapsed in the white space between the two chapters

Joseph no doubt realized long ago that his release wasn't coming due to the testimony of the cupbearer and he has settled back into his normal routine while in prison of caring for the other prisoners

Up to this point in Joseph's life he has experienced some pretty significant highs and lows

In his youth he was his father's favorite son and chosen heir

He was put in a position of authority over his older brothers and God showed him in his dreams that his family would all pay respect to him at some future time

He was subsequently sold into slavery by his envious brothers and he labored as a menial slave for close to 11 years in the household of Potiphar before he was recognized for his successes and elevated to a position of authority

No sooner had he begun to achieve success in this new position than he was propositioned by his master's wife and cast into prison for rejecting her advances

But then, one day two of Pharaoh's officers found themselves in prison and under Joseph's care and they both had dreams that God empowered Joseph to interpret

And Joseph's hopes were raised when the cupbearer said he would bring his case to Pharaoh's attention only to be dashed when the cupbearer failed to do as he promised

Now two years have gone by

Joseph has no idea things are about to change for him and that his life is about to take a dramatic turn for the better

In this chapter we are going to see Joseph be the recipient of a level of instant success that had more potential to derail his faith than all of the failures he had experienced up to this point put together

And once again we have much to learn from Joseph's example

We have seen how he responded to adversity and now we will see how he responded to success

And this is a vital lesson for us today because more Christians are impoverished spiritually by prosperity than are by adversity

As our account opens this morning we are going to see that Pharaoh has a pair of dreams that disturb him greatly

They are typical dreams in that they contain imagery that is unnatural and weird – like cannibalistic cows and wheat but we aren't going to spend time dissecting those dreams

Instead, we are going to view them as merely the catalyst that got Joseph out of prison and elevated to his new position and our focus will be on Joseph and how he was able to successfully handle the sudden reversal of fortune

There are three traits that Joseph demonstrates in this account that are the keys to his success

If you are taking notes, your Roman numeral one is, **unwavering constancy**

Roman numeral two is, **unmistakable character**

And Roman numeral three is, **unfailing contentment**

I. Unwavering Constancy

The first thing we want to notice is that, whether things were going well or things were going badly, Joseph was a "Steady Eddie" – there was an **unwavering constancy** in his attitude and activity

I find that to be an amazing trait

When he was working for his father, he was loyal and responsible even when it caused his brothers to hate him

When he was a lowly slave Joseph was hard-working to the degree that it was noticeable to his pagan master who promoted him to a position of great authority by giving him charge of all he had

When Potiphar's wife tried to seduce him he was loyal to his master and to God even though giving in had to have been a great temptation

In prison he continued on in the same way as he always had and the chief jailer saw fit to put all the other prisoners under Joseph's charge and care

And, while we aren't told what transpired during those two years in between Chapters 40 and 41, we have no reason to think that Joseph stopped being Joseph – I have every confidence he just carried on with excellence as he always had

Joseph experienced more ups and downs than an elevator – in fact, we could nickname him "Yo Yo Joe"

But he appears to have been perpetually unflappable in spite of all the reversals he went through

And I'm amazed by that – how about you?

How do you react when you experience a reversal in your life?

I have to admit, I don't handle "sudden" well – I need time to process whatever happens whether it's good or bad

Simply put, me and sudden do not mix

But, if we're honest, I believe most of us would admit we find it difficult to maintain equilibrium in the face of sudden reversals

What typically happens when we face a sudden reversal for the worse?

We begin to moan and groan, we become disheartened, we think God might well have abandoned us, and we become bitter because we believe we've been mistreated

Honestly now, that's pretty much true isn't it?

But what happens when we experience a sudden reversal for the better?

Things are different then aren't they?

When that happens we become proud and remarkably independent

You might even say we become arrogant as suddenly we think we don't need God and, rather than God abandoning us, we abandon God as we become quite secular in our attitudes and actions

But not Joseph

Joseph seems to have been totally unflappable and constant in his demeanor

And that's because Joseph never took his eyes off of God

Ancient travelers were able to plot their course by fixing their bearings on the North Star because it never moves – it's always positioned right above the North Pole

And when you want to draw a straight line from point A to point B you will have greater success when you fix your eyes on where you are headed than you will be if you stare at your pencil point and try to guide it along its path

Joseph had his eyes fixed firmly on his God who never changes so his path was steady in spite of all the ups and downs he experienced

I'm reminded of Peter in Matthew 14 when Jesus was walking toward the boat carrying his disciples and Peter requested that Jesus command him to walk on the water to him

And how Peter was successful, how he actually defied the laws of nature, and walked on the water as long as he kept his eyes fixed firmly on Jesus

But then in verse 30 (**Matthew 14:30**) we see that Peter took his eyes off of Jesus and when he did, he began to sink

And Jesus asked Peter, "*O you of little faith, why did you doubt?*" as he lifted him up and got him safely back into the boat

Faith is simply trust put into action and very often we find we are just like Peter –

We too can be people of little faith when we take our eyes off of the Lord and see only our circumstances

James Montgomery Boice [**Boice.jpg**] put it this way:

"How sinful, therefore, for a Christian to worry or fret. God moves the very stars in their orbits to work his will, and he rules the passions of men and the decisions of those in authority to accomplish what he had planned. That is why Christians should not fret at the loss of a job, a flat tire, a bout of unexpected sickness, or whatever. God is God."

And when we fail to see God's hand when things go well and our faith is placed in our own abilities, we are equally sinful

But when we see God in our circumstances and trust him he can use those circumstances to make us better

God can use adversity to make us stronger and more even-tempered and he can use success to embolden and encourage us

And both highs and lows can, and should, draw us closer to him as we acknowledge and submit to his sovereign will

In **1 Samuel 2:30** God says, "*...those who honor me I will honor, and those who despise me shall be lightly esteemed.*"

Clearly, Joseph honored God in all his circumstances and so God honored him

And God's blessing upon Joseph was noticed by all, even by Pharaoh himself as we see next

II. Unmistakable Character

Finally, two years after the cupbearer had been restored to his former position, he thought to tell Pharaoh about Joseph. Pharaoh was frustrated because his magicians and wise men couldn't tell him the meaning of his dreams.

And this caused the cupbearer to remember how Joseph had been able to accurately interpret his dream and the dream of the baker who had been executed.

It's doubtful that the cupbearer had given Joseph much more than a passing thought over the past two years until Pharaoh's need presented itself.

After all, Joseph was a slave of foreign birth and the cupbearer was a nobleman – there is no real reason he would have worried himself about the condition of a slave.

And even if he had mentioned Joseph right away, there is no reason to think that Pharaoh would have taken an interest in Joseph's case – he didn't have any reason to do so at that time.

But once more we see the hand of God obviously at work in sending the troubling dreams to Pharaoh at just the right time – after two more years had elapsed.

By every indication, Joseph had no idea why God was leaving him in prison and we will likely not understand why God leaves us in the dark.

But God's timing is always perfect – he is never late or early and when the time is right, he will release us as he did Joseph.

Proverbs 21:1 tells us – *The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will.*

And by sending Pharaoh these particular dreams at this particular time God started the wheels in motion that would lead not only to Joseph being released from prison but also his being promoted to prime minister of Egypt.

We might wonder why Pharaoh's usual interpreters couldn't interpret his dreams or why they didn't just give him some vague interpretation; much like supposed fortune tellers and mystics do today.

Joseph actually provided us with the answer to that question in **Genesis 40:8** when he asked, "Do not interpretations belong to God?"

I believe God prevented the magicians and wise men of Egypt from even being able to hazard a guess as to the meaning of Pharaoh's dreams.

Obviously, God also turns the hearts and minds of lesser men according to his will.

In **verse 14** we see that it seems the cupbearer barely finished telling Pharaoh about Joseph when Pharaoh called for Joseph to be brought before him.

The dreams God had sent Pharaoh were so vivid and so disturbingly realistic that **verse 7** says that when Pharaoh awoke from the second dream he had to assure himself it indeed had been a dream.

So he wasted no time in sending for Joseph.

Look with me at verses 15-16 where we see the initial exchange between the two men – *And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I have had a dream, and there is no one who can interpret it. I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it." Joseph answered Pharaoh, "It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer."*

Here we see Joseph face another temptation and successfully resist it.

Pharaoh had just given Joseph the perfect opportunity to glorify himself by telling him that none of his own advisers had been able to interpret the dreams but that he had heard Joseph could.

If Joseph had wanted to he could have gotten all puffed up and tried to accept the accolades that would have surely come his way.

But he chose instead to give God the glory and risked losing any advantage in Pharaoh's eyes he might have won.

As far as Joseph was concerned, absolute truthfulness in guarding God's honor was far more important than personal advantage

And God rewarded Joseph with more than just an accurate interpretation of the dreams but also provided him with the master plan that would save Egypt

And not only that, but God also saw to it that Joseph was promoted to the highest rank possible under Pharaoh!

Look with me at **verse 37-45** where we see Pharaoh's reaction to Joseph's plan –

This proposal pleased Pharaoh and all his servants. And Pharaoh said to his servants, "Can we find a man like this, in whom is the Spirit of God?" Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has shown you all this, there is none so discerning and wise as you are. You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command. Only as regards the throne will I be greater than you." And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt." Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph's hand, and clothed him in garments of fine linen and put a gold chain about his neck. And he made him ride in his second chariot. And they called out before him, "Bow the knee!" Thus he set him over all the land of Egypt. Moreover, Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I am Pharaoh, and without your consent no one shall lift up hand or foot in all the land of Egypt." And Pharaoh called Joseph's name Zaphenath-paneah. And he gave him in marriage Asenath, the daughter of Potiphara priest of On. So Joseph went out over the land of Egypt.

And in **verse 46** we see that Joseph was just thirty years old when he took over control of the mightiest nation in existence

In this description we see two things that Pharaoh noticed about Joseph's character

First, he noticed that Joseph was **"discerning and wise"**

Perhaps Pharaoh was used to being surrounded by self-promoting sycophants who would do anything to curry his favor and gain an advantage and he was impressed by Joseph's restraint in not taking credit for what God was doing and his admittance that he was dependent upon God

Or perhaps he was just impressed that Joseph was wise enough to interpret the dreams and come up with such a plan

But it is interesting that Pharaoh acknowledged that God had shown all those things to Joseph and that he used the exact same words to describe Joseph as Joseph had used to describe the kind of man Pharaoh should select

Second, Pharaoh recognized that Joseph was filled with the Holy Spirit – he said, *"Can we find a man like this, in whom is the Spirit of God?"*

Make a note that this is the first time in Scripture that the Holy Spirit is recorded as coming upon someone

And Pharaoh's eyes were opened so that he recognized the Spirit's work in Joseph's interpretation and presentation of the plan to save Egypt

Pharaoh noticed that Joseph wasn't just an outstanding young man but that there was something supernatural about him and that Joseph's God was the source of it

We don't see any indication that Joseph was tempted to allow Pharaoh to give him glory that was rightly God's but we know the temptation was there

And we might rationalize that it really doesn't seem like all that big a deal if Joseph had allowed Pharaoh to give him more credit than he rightly deserved

The apostle Paul wrote in **1 Corinthians 9:27** about the danger of being "disqualified"

That word, "disqualified" was used in Paul's day to describe the practice of shaving a little bit of precious metal from the edges of the coins of the realm and the eventual day when a coin was so pared down it was no longer any good

Joseph apparently recognized that even the smallest compromise would be a whittling down of his character and in time those small compromises would add up and he might well lose God's power in his life – and in resisting he maintained his character

The last key to Joseph's success I want us to notice is his **unfailing contentment** in all situations

III. Unfailing Contentment

We never get the sense that Joseph felt overly sorry for himself or overly proud of himself

Again, Joseph appears to be a "Steady Eddie" when it came to the area of contentment

Whether he was up or down, Joseph seems to have been on an even keel

Here he was at only thirty years old occupying the most powerful position of his day

Joseph could have very easily succumbed to the siren song of pride

But Joseph kept his eye on God just as he always had

We read that Joseph was married to an Egyptian wife and had two sons who he named to give honor to God

His first son he named Manasseh which sounds like the Hebrew word for "cause to forget"

And he named his second son, Ephraim which sounds like the Hebrew word for "make fruitful"

Because he said, "It was God who made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house" and "It was God who made me fruitful in the land of my affliction"

Joseph may have forgotten the abuse and hardship he faced in his father's house but he didn't forget the faith of his people and the Hebrew names he gave to his sons is proof of that fact

Joseph kept his eyes on God and he was content to be a slave if God wanted him to be a slave

He was content to be a prisoner if God wanted him to be a prisoner

And he was content to act as prime minister in Egypt if that was the position God put him in

God had healed the wounds that Joseph suffered at the hands of others and he was willing and able to let the past be left in the past and to continue on with God in the fruitful life he was then living and be content

Because Joseph also had the rare ability to be industrious and faithful in whatever position he occupied without being grasping or manipulative or self-promoting or even dissatisfied and longing for more

We've repeatedly commented how remarkable it was that Joseph was able to keep his eyes on God and to maintain his spiritual equilibrium when he was suffering so much unjust hardship

But it is even more remarkable that he was able to do exactly the same when he was elevated to a position of prosperity

Joseph would have found kinship with the apostle Paul and agreed with the words we find in **Philippian 4:11-13** –

I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

Joseph and Paul knew that God was the gatekeeper over their circumstances and the source of the strength to face them

And they demonstrated complete trust in his care for them so they knew how to be content whether they were riding high or brought low

Conclusion

Once again, Joseph teaches us a powerful and needed lesson by his example

Too many believers are held captive by their present circumstances and we allow our attitudes and our actions to be influenced or even determined by our current situation

We fail to keep our eyes on God and thus are tossed about with every change in fortune like a cork on the water

We protest and despair when things aren't going well and we exalt and boast when they are and we rarely stop to ask what God's purposes are in any of it

Scripture freely speaks about discipline and refining in the life of the believer and how those are not pleasant experiences while we are going through them

But it also tells us how those unpleasant experiences make us into the kind of people God wants us to be

I doubt very highly that Joseph enjoyed his time as a slave or his time in prison – but I also doubt just as highly he allowed those situations to make him miserable because he kept his eyes firmly focused on God

And he knew that he could trust his God in every circumstance of life

Therefore, he was able to show forth confidence and industry even in the worst of situations that served as a bright beacon to all who came within his orbit

And even the pagan Pharaoh had to admit that Joseph had something that he didn't possess and that its source was God

The Lord Jesus also demonstrated this same kind of trust in the Father as he faced the cross

We know that he didn't welcome the horrors that lay before him but, as Hebrews 12 tells us, he "endured" them

And he submitted to the Father's will and in the end the Father lifted his name above every name

As we close we will be partaking in the Lord's Table – the ordinance Jesus gave his Church for the purpose of remembering his sacrifice on our behalf

Like Joseph, Jesus fixed his eyes on the Father and trusted in his care and he endured the worst experience of his life with the confidence that only faithful trust in God can give – and he emerged victorious on the other side

Our closing hymn this morning is #550 – I Want to Be Like Jesus

The second half of the first verse says:

I want my heart his throne to be, so that a watching world may see his likeness shining forth in me. I want to be like Jesus

In order for that to be true of us the watching world must see that we, like Joseph, have a constancy of demeanor and an uncompromising character and that we have learned how to be truly content in all circumstances

Therefore, we must always keep our eyes firmly fixed on the Lord – in trials and in prosperity – with the confidence that he is right there beside us going through it with us and sustaining us until his work in and on our lives is done

Let's pray