

"From Prison to Palace"
Genesis 38:1-41:57
Carol Martin

No doubt you're familiar with some version of the thought, "Life is 10% what happens to you and 90% how you react to it." We're accustomed to live in an ordinary day to day existence with the occasional crisis and/or stress thrown in – and usually we experience the stress much more frequently than we'd like. How do we react under both conditions . . . the calm and the crisis?

Joseph is one of the "big four" Bible characters we meet in Genesis:

- 1) Abraham showed us the power of God moving him from a pagan village to a promised land and giving him a promised son in his old age.
- 2) Isaac showed us the provision of God by the substitution of a ram when he was to be sacrificed and God leading in the securing of a beautiful wife named Rebekah.
- 3) Jacob showed us the purpose of God. His twelve sons would form the twelve tribes of Israel, the seed of God's nation. Through him, not the older twin Esau, would eventually come the Messiah.
- 4) Joseph shows us the plan of God and how He gave him a tailor-made education designed to mature Joseph and eventually save the budding nation from famine by bringing them to Egypt. It would take 400 years of further education and depravation before Moses would take them home again. It's what we term today. . . the "school of hard knocks."

We would tend to think that the Messiah would come through Joseph, wouldn't we? But, no, Jesus would come through the line of Judah. Isn't God's plan interesting? It reminds us that His ways are not our ways. Remember it was Judah's plan to sell Joseph to the caravan of Ishmaelites. No doubt Joseph heard the plan while he was in the pit. He knew who the mastermind was. So even though it would be Judah and not Joseph as the chosen line, nevertheless, we can see some remarkable similarities between Jesus and Joseph and we'll explore them as we go along. The Old Testament is full of what we call "types and shadows."

Now Genesis 38 seems almost like an interruption in Joseph's story, but it explains a little background about Judah and what we read in Christ's genealogy given in Matthew 1:3, "Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar . . ." I've mentioned to you all along about becoming familiar with Bible names. After this study, you'll get more out of the first chapter of Matthew.

Our lesson opens today with Genesis 38:1 "At that time, Judah left his brothers..." Remember Jacob had refused to be consoled in his grief. Do you suppose the brothers

blamed Judah because it was his plan? If things were difficult at home before, they were probably impossible now with a father continually depressed. Maybe it was his guilty conscience. Whatever, the pressure around home drove him away.

Now this must have been very shortly after Joseph was sold, because the time lapse between Joseph's sale and Jacob taking his entire clan to Egypt was only a little more than 20 years and, in that time, Judah married, had sons, and they also married. Judah married a Canaanite woman . . . another mistake. If ever there were one lesson we could learn from Old Testament study, it is that of the trials and consequences when there is intermarriage between believers in the one true God and non-believers. God so aptly teaches us that we should not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. What does darkness have to do with light? Compromise from the outset will lead to a lifetime of compromise in spiritual things. If only we could get that message into our own heads and across to our children.

Children were produced from this marriage. Er was married to Tamar, but God slew him for his wickedness (and no one knows what that was specifically). It was the custom of that day in almost every culture that what is called a "levirate marriage" would take place when a man died. (Don't confuse that with the tribe of Levi.) In a levirate marriage, a brother was to marry the widow and produce a son that would become heir for the dead brother. With no heir for Er, Onan would get the first-born inheritance, so he refused to do that and was killed by God. Now with two dead sons, Judah sent Tamar back to her father presumably until Judah's third son became of marriageable age.

We covered the story pretty thoroughly in our lesson . . . Judah didn't keep his promise. He mistook Tamar for a Canaanite temple prostitute and had sex with her, then in self-righteous indignation when he found out his daughter-in-law was pregnant, ordered her to be burnt (the severest penalty, since stoning was the usual punishment). Well, the pot called the kettle "black" didn't he? She presented his seal, cord and staff as proof that he was the cause of her pregnancy. Judah declared, "She is more righteous than I." Why? They both lied and deceived. But Judah knew God; he knew what was right, but had turned his back on it. Tamar was just a product of her Canaanite culture. There are many people out there in the world today whose only aim is survival at any cost. When a Christian compromises godly standards and values, lies and deceives, doesn't keep his word, he might as well be in the world. The carnal Christian and the unbeliever often look very much alike.

Well, from this union of Judah and Tamar twins were born – Perez and Zerah. If you look at Ruth chapter 4, you'll see – Perez the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram, the father of Aminadab, the father of Nashon, the father of Salmon, the father of Boaz, the father of Obed, the father of Jesse, the father of David. Jesus Christ would be born through the line of Judah and Tamar. When Christ came into the human family,

He came in a sinful lineage. He was made sin for us, He who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him. (2 Corinthians 5:21)

There are five women in the genealogy of Jesus . . . Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba and Mary. Think about their backgrounds. Today you know a little more about Tamar.

Solomon tells us in Ecclesiastes 3:1 that “to everything there is a season.” One thing that seems to be in season every day of the year is temptation. Praise God we have 1 Corinthians 10:13 that reminds us, “No temptation has seized you but such as is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.” Sometimes that way of escape is to just to say “NO!” There is not one person, including Jesus, who hasn’t struggled with it.

In the rest of our lesson the focus is on Joseph in three settings:
1) Potiphar’s house, 2) Prison, and 3) Pharaoh’s palace.

Don’t you think that Joseph was a remarkable young man? Here he is at 17 quickly working his way up from purchased slave to overseer of Potiphar’s household. He obviously had some abilities and personal characteristics such as loyalty, respectfulness, affability and leadership which Potiphar appreciated . . . as well as what Mrs. Potiphar appreciated in vs. 6 – the fact that he was well-built and handsome.

Think about the situation . . . Potiphar was so comfortable with things at home that he probably spent too much time at the office. Mrs. Potiphar probably felt neglected and didn’t have a lot of golf and bridge buddies. So, Joseph? Well,
1) he was in the household and encountered her day after day;
2) her advances must have flattered his young ego;
3) she was persistent;
4) they were usually alone, so who would know?

It was a vulnerable time for Joseph. We need to think about this because it’s easy to see Joseph as so virtuous in his lifetime that we minimize the real danger this was to him.

In almost every instance where the issue of sexual lust is dealt with in the New Testament, we’re told to flee, to get up and run (1 Cor. 6:18). Some temptations we’re to stand and resist. But when it comes to sexual lust, we’re told to do just what Joseph did – get out of there! But once he got outside, he didn’t hear any angels singing his praises for saying “No.” What he heard instead was the scream of a woman – a scream that would hurl him from the heights as Potiphar’s overseer to the depths of an obscure jail cell.

Victor Hugo said, "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned." That certainly applied to Potiphar's wife. For a second time a coat was made to lie about Joseph.

Considering Potiphar's position, he could have had Joseph executed for trying to rape his wife. Maybe he didn't fully believe her story. Regardless, Joseph was sent to jail . . . a place where political prisoners are kept, not a human cesspool where hardened criminals were put. But don't misunderstand – the prison experience was no picnic for Joseph. Jail beat the pit into which his brothers had tossed him, but it was also a far cry from Potiphar's comfortable house.

What is marvelous is Joseph's reaction to these new events . . . he is not under his circumstances, but on top of them. The Lord is still with Joseph, and grants him "favor in the eyes of the prison warden." Potiphar may have put in a good word also. But like Potiphar, the warden recognized talent, trustworthiness, and the touch of God, and placed Joseph in charge of the entire prison, and Scripture says he was so confident in Joseph's character and ability that he "didn't even worry about it." (vs.23)

Now comes a time when Joseph's life is "on hold." Day in, day out . . . dull routine . . . in a place where he didn't want to be. Where is the hope that things will change? Is there any dread that whatever is next may be worse? Where is God? Why aren't my prayers heard? Helplessness and Hopelessness. That is the cycle so many are prone to fall into. But for Joseph, prison is only ten percent . . . he will make the best of it with an attitude of reliance on God and God's planning to make up the ninety percent.

One of the hardest things we have to do is wait. But in our waiting for God's next open door, He's watching to see how we handle things. He desires we bear fruit in circumstances that would confound others. He longs to see us persevere with patience, progressing in our Christian lives, all the while leaning totally upon Him. He wants to see us pour over His Word for indications of His will. He hopes we'll be driven to our knees in earnest prayer. He desires that we come to the end of ourselves, for that is the beginning of truly trusting Him. He wants to make us fruitful, especially in the land of our affliction. It is what V. Raymond Edman calls "the discipline of delay."

That this was not just the ordinary jail is seen in the fact that two genuine palace VIP's – the chief cupbearer and the chief baker – were thrown into it. We're not told why. The cupbearer's duty to Pharaoh was to taste the wine for poison before Pharaoh drank, and the chief baker was responsible for the whole dining room operation at court. They'd been in prison for some time according to vs. 4 when they each had a dream. Joseph's sensitivity to others is evident as he noticed a definite change in them and inquired why they're so downcast? The dreams were told to Joseph and He acknowledged that God can interpret dreams. To the cupbearer the news is good – complete restoration to his former position in three days; to the chief baker the news is bad – death by hanging in three days. The interpretations were true . . . it came to pass.

Can't you imagine the joy the cupbearer felt at being told he'd be released and restored to his old position? Sometimes when we're on either end of the emotional scale – total elation or total sorrow – we only hear and remember half of what's said to us. Don't you find that true? Joseph asked the cupbearer to remember him and intercede with Pharaoh for his release from prison. That's a natural request that would lead him to jump to the conclusion that the cupbearer will provide a means of immediate escape for him. He's presuming that this must be God's will and way for him to get out. Don't we often try to help God along?

The prison door closed . . . the cupbearer was out, but Joseph was still inside, wondering no doubt how long it would be before his deliverance. But the chapter closes with the words, "The chief cupbearer, however, did not remember Joseph; he forgot him."

Days drag into months, but we don't see disappointment drag into bitterness in Joseph. Again, it is a choice of attitude in difficult circumstances. God is in control, I am where I am for His purpose, He will change things in His own good timing . . . and (like the three in the fiery furnace) even if He does not rescue me from this, I will stand firm in my love and commitment to Him. This is what is called character . . . this is integrity . . . this is what knowing God in a personal way is all about.

Daily faithfulness in ordinary duties is the very best preparation for future service. Joseph kept on keeping on for another two years.

Then the day came when Pharaoh had two dreams. Because of the intimate position that the chief cupbearer held next to Pharaoh, he heard Pharaoh seek the wisdom of his counselors and vs. 9 says he responded, "Today I am reminded of my shortcomings."

What is so great about that statement is that he did something about it . . . he remembered Joseph's abilities to Pharaoh. What is your reaction when you realize you've "blown it" in some area? It's so easy to rationalize – well, it's too late now; or they've probably forgotten all about it; or it's just water under the bridge. This man is an example to us . . . when you remember something you've neglected, set about to keep your word, to set the record straight. That's character and integrity.

Well, Joseph was sent for and did you notice in verse 14 how he shaved and changed clothes? He dressed for success. (Something our society could certainly stand to see more of.) Israelites were bearded people and very possibly Joseph grew his beard in prison. Egyptians, however, were clean-shaven. Joseph respected the custom of the land and the office of the person he was about to see. I don't think prison put a damper on his personal hygiene so that he was dirty and unkempt . . . I think he knew the importance of a good impression and it reflected his own self-esteem.

The dreams were interpreted – seven years of plenty were to be followed by seven years of famine and Joseph urged Pharaoh to appoint a man who would take preventive action by storing up during the period of plenty to avoid suffering in the famine. That in substance was the interpretation and advice Joseph gave to Pharaoh. There is not a word uttered about his situation, not a hint he considered himself to be the man who should be appointed. The frankness with which he told Pharaoh about his dream, the quiet dignity with which he gave his counsel showed to us and to Pharaoh his character of being always ready, ever conscientious, never sacrificing principle, faithful and fearless in every crisis.

Pharaoh was so deeply impressed with Joseph's wisdom that he recognized he possessed divine powers and that the "spirit of God" was on him. Who knows what that meant to Pharaoh . . . we know the Holy Spirit is active and working, especially in Christians, to bring about all things for good to God's glory. God's plan was developing.

Jacob's family was still living among the heathen Canaanites and being influenced by them. They needed to be extracted, molded into a nation, and tried by suffering to bring full dependence upon God before being restored to the Promised Land. Joseph's promotion set a God-appointed chain of events into action.

Second only to Pharaoh, Joseph at age 30 entered the service of Pharaoh. He was given an Egyptian name, and entered into an arranged marriage to Asenath, daughter of an Egyptian priest. He was given all the trappings of his powerful position and the actual authority to carry out the plan he'd outlined to Pharaoh. During the years of plenty the bounty was so great that they stopped keeping records.

From his marriage Joseph had a family of two sons - Manasseh and Ephraim. When the Levites would later be extracted from land inheritance because of their special service to God, Manasseh and Ephraim would fill the places of Levi and Joseph so that there would still be a division of land among twelve tribes of Israel.

God's plan was in progress. Joseph was still serving Pharaoh as diligently as ever. "Do whatever Joseph tells you" was Pharaoh's attitude. Complete trust. After the bounty came the famine . . . and it wasn't just in Egypt, it extended to the then known world. Word was spreading – Egypt has grain to sell and all the countries came to buy.

I spoke about "types and shadows" in Scripture. Let's take a minute to point out just a few of the many similarities between Joseph and Jesus that make Joseph a type of Christ in the Old Testament. There really isn't time to expand on each of these, but maybe it will intrigue you enough to do some study on your own or at least give it some thought:

- By occupation Joseph and his family were shepherds. Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd.
- Joseph as a type of Christ prefigured Jesus as a foreteller of the future and especially His own future.
- Joseph was hated by his brothers because he testified concerning their wicked deeds. He was hated not only because of who he was (his father's favorite son), but also because of what he said.
- Joseph came to his own brothers at Shechem but they received him not and plotted to kill him.
- Joseph had a beautiful robe (the tradition of that day said it was seamless) and we know that in John 19 soldiers gambled for Jesus' seamless coat at the foot of the cross.
- Joseph was a man of impeccable character and, while we do not claim he was sinless as was Jesus, nevertheless, his every attitude and action were admirable reflecting his total devotion to God.
- Joseph suffered unjustly, was condemned by lies, and forsaken by those whom he had helped.
- Joseph rose from the humiliation of prisoner to ruler in the palace. Jesus rose from the humiliation of death on the cross to sit at the right hand of the Lord God Almighty.

Wonderful things to think about.

So, where are you today . . . in the calm or the crisis? I don't mean just the busyness of this season with its hustle and bustle, but in your spirit. Are you quietly waiting upon God for the next move in your life, His next call upon you for an area of service, His next challenge to grow in the fruit of the Spirit? Or is it a time of crisis – feeling helpless and hopeless, crying out to God to change circumstances or people in your life? This story of Joseph should be one of real encouragement to us wherever we are. It reaffirms that God is sovereign, God knows, God cares and most of all there is nothing He can't handle . . . but it will be in His perfect timing.

Speaking of timing, it's obvious that we're drawing very near that wonderful time of year when we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ – Christmas. All the leaders wish you a blessed holiday season.

Let's close in prayer. Stand for the Doxology.