



Prison, Power and Prosperity, Part Two
Genesis 41

⁴¹ 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.

⁴⁴ Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, “I am Pharaoh, but without your word no one will lift hand or foot in all Egypt.” ⁴⁵ Pharaoh gave Joseph the name Zaphenath-Paneah and gave him Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On to be his wife. And Joseph went throughout the land of Egypt.

⁴⁶ Joseph was thirty years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh king of Egypt. And Joseph went out from Pharaoh’s presence and traveled throughout Egypt. ⁴⁷ During the seven years of abundance the land produced plentifully. ⁴⁸ Joseph collected all the food produced in those seven years of abundance in Egypt and stored it in the cities. In each city he put the food grown in the fields surrounding it. ⁴⁹ Joseph stored up huge quantities of grain, like the sand of the sea; it was so much that he stopped keeping records because it was beyond measure.

⁵⁰ Before the years of famine came, two sons were born to Joseph by Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On. ⁵¹ Joseph named his firstborn Manasseh and said, “It is because God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father’s household.” ⁵² The second son he named Ephraim and said, “It is because God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering.”

⁵³ The seven years of abundance in Egypt came to an end, ⁵⁴ and the seven years of famine began, just as Joseph had said. There was famine in all the other lands, but in the whole land of Egypt there was food. ⁵⁵ When all Egypt began to feel the famine, the people cried to Pharaoh for food. Then Pharaoh told all the Egyptians, “Go to Joseph and do what he tells you.”

⁵⁶ When the famine had spread over the whole country, Joseph opened the storehouses and sold grain to the Egyptians, for the famine was severe throughout Egypt. ⁵⁷ And all the countries came to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph, because the famine was severe in all the world.

My job this morning is to encourage you to, to assure you that you will make it through this. We only have two more weeks of political ads and you will survive the onslaught. ☺ Like this [video clip](#) so humorously demonstrates, when it comes to our leaders, elected and otherwise, we really do want someone with leadership and integrity and a whole lot of other positive qualities. And we don’t want things like laziness and thievery which are far too common negative attributes. As we continue our study of Joseph’s rise to power in Egypt, we will see several attributes in Joseph

that made him uniquely qualified to save millions from starvation, especially those of the nation of Israel.

Let's pick up where we left off last week in verse sixteen. In reply to Pharaoh's question about interpreting his dream, Joseph replied, "I cannot do it, but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires." I don't like the way the NIV translates the last phrase in verse sixteen because it could be taken one of two ways. It could mean that Joseph has the ability to interpret Pharaoh's dream, which by itself would be the answer he was seeking. Pharaoh was seeking someone to interpret and Joseph can be God's mouthpiece to make that happen. But Joseph is saying a whole lot more than that. The KJV translates the phrase this way: "God will give Pharaoh an answer of peace." That is right on because the Hebrew word is *shalom*. Shalom has a much fuller meaning than our English word for peace. Shalom can mean peace, prosperity, health, safety, welfare. It is a state of contentment and blessing. With that understanding in mind, I prefer the translation of the ESV—God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer." Understand then, that Joseph not only predicted that God would interpret the dream but that the answer would be favorable to Pharaoh. Joseph's answer would bring him peace and prosperity.

But how do we reconcile this so-called "favorable answer" with the fact that the actual interpretation was going to bring seven years of famine and mass starvation? How could such a thing be termed *favorable*? Egyptian texts records famines so severe that parents were forced to eat their children. The same thing happened in Israel during the time of Elisha.

²⁴ Some time later, Ben-Hadad king of Aram mobilized his entire army and marched up and laid siege to Samaria. ²⁵ There was a great famine in the city; the siege lasted so long that a donkey's head sold for eighty shekels of silver, and a quarter of a cab of seed pods for five shekels.

²⁶ As the king of Israel was passing by on the wall, a woman cried to him, "Help me, my lord the king!"

²⁷ The king replied, "If the LORD does not help you, where can I get help for you? From the threshing floor? From the winepress?" ²⁸ Then he asked her, "What's the matter?"

She answered, "This woman said to me, 'Give up your son so we may eat him today, and tomorrow we'll eat my son.' ²⁹ So we cooked my son and ate him. The next day I said to her, 'Give up your son so we may eat him,' but she had hidden him." (2 Kings 6:24-29)

This is one of the most gruesome descriptions in all of Scripture but without divine intervention, all of Egypt as well as surrounding nations would be given over to such desperation. Given this potential for disaster, how could Joseph claim that he had a favorable answer? He could say that because God not only gave Joseph the interpretation but he also gave him this idea about gathering stores of food during the seven good years to prepare for the seven years of famine. But in the past I had always read this as two separate parts to the story. In the first part Joseph tells Pharaoh the interpretation of the dream given to him by God and in the second part Joseph devises a plan to save millions of people from starvation. But in reality, both the interpretation *and* the survival strategy were divinely inspired. Armed with this knowledge, Joseph knew that even though the dream foretold of a massive famine, in the end, everyone would be saved through this strategy. Therefore Joseph was able to confidently tell Pharaoh that everything was going to turn out favorably. **God** would give Pharaoh a favorable answer.

This is a great display of God's common grace to millions of people who did not worship him. God's plan was to spare the budding nation of Israel through Joseph's crazy life but in the process of sparing his chosen people God would also spare the Egyptians and many other nations who would eventually come and buy grain from Egypt. God does this all of the time for countless people who don't deserve these blessings. People who curse God with one breath and praise the beauty of a fall day with the next. People who worship foreign gods or no God at all yet still demand the good things in life. God's common grace is so amazing that sometimes, like the Psalmists did, we have to cry out "Why do the wicked prosper? If they are so wicked why do they get such blessings?" In a few generations the Pharaohs of Egypt would forget all about Joseph's plan to save the entire nation and they would enslave his ancestors. Why should God save the Egyptians when he knows they will become slave masters of his people? Because God is gracious. We should never fault God for his generosity even when unbelievers appear to be more blessed than you and I. Such people may have all of the earthly treasures this life can offer but without a personal knowledge of God, their blessings are quickly fading away. We have the greatest treasure and it's not an it—his name is Jesus Christ.

When the time came to spell out his plan, Joseph was very specific in his description and his recommendation to the powerful Pharaoh. "And now let Pharaoh look for a discerning and wise man and put him in charge of the land of Egypt." Because this was Joseph's plan and because we know how the story turns out, there is almost a sense that we could think that Joseph is doing a bit of self-promotion here. "Pharaoh, you need a wise and discerning man to lead your country in this time of peril. In fact, I think you need a clean shaven guy with extensive managerial experience that was earned in the trenches—say, like a slave who rose through the ranks to become assistant warden. You need a go getter kind of guy. Frankly, I'm your man for the job." It's impossible to say, but even though God gave the interpretation and the plan to Joseph, I don't think he was vying for the job. I think Joseph was so humble that he didn't even consider himself.

But Pharaoh did think Joseph was the obvious choice. He said to his officials, "Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God?" It doesn't come across in the NIV but Pharaoh used a plural for of the word *god* here—saying that Joseph had the spirit of the gods. Pharaoh was wise in his choice of Joseph but Pharaoh was no monotheist. Joseph said to Pharaoh "God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires," that is the God, singular, will give the answer. But Pharaoh is so steeped in polytheism that even though he witnessed Joseph perform a miracle, he couldn't see the reality of only one God. Four hundred years later, the Lord would forever make himself known as "The Lord your God who brought you up from the land of Egypt." Moses would declare "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one."

Joseph was filled not with the spirit of the gods but The Spirit of God, namely the Holy Spirit. Joseph was truly Spirit filled. Pharaoh also referred to Joseph in the most glowing terms—he called him wise and discerning—the same words that Joseph said would be required for such a person. Had Joseph been running a campaign to become second in command of Egypt, these would have been the two words on his yard signs—Joseph: Wise and Discerning. Compared to Pharaoh's magicians, who may have been running a campaign of "laziness and thievery," or at

the very least incompetence, when Pharaoh weighed the difference, Joseph was head and shoulders above the competition.

Let's take a moment and talk about these two words—wise and discerning. These two words are paired together several places in the Old Testament. In Dt 4.6 we read, “Observe them carefully (that is, all of God’s commands), for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.” According to this passage, a wise and discerning person is one who understands and obeys the Lord’s commands. Wisdom and discernment never stops at right understanding but always includes right actions and obedience. We see this in the 14th chapter of Hosea. I will read the whole chapter for context.

Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God. Your sins have been your downfall!

² Take words with you and return to the LORD. Say to him:

“Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously, that we may offer the fruit of our lips.

³ Assyria cannot save us; we will not mount war-horses.

We will never again say ‘Our gods’ to what our own hands have made,
for in you the fatherless find compassion.”

⁴ “I will heal their waywardness and love them freely,
for my anger has turned away from them.

⁵ I will be like the dew to Israel; he will blossom like a lily.

Like a cedar of Lebanon he will send down his roots; ⁶ his young shoots will grow.

His splendor will be like an olive tree, his fragrance like a cedar of Lebanon.

⁷ Men will dwell again in his shade. He will flourish like the grain.

He will blossom like a vine, and his fame will be like the wine from Lebanon.

⁸ O Ephraim, what more have I to do with idols?

I will answer him and care for him. I am like a green pine tree;
your fruitfulness comes from me.”

⁹ Who is wise? He will realize these things. Who is discerning? He will understand them.

The ways of the LORD are right; the righteous walk in them, but the rebellious stumble in them.

The wise and discerning person repents of his or her sin. The wise and discerning person admits that true power and deliverance comes from the Lord, not from their own strength. A wise and discerning person is able to receive God’s full forgiveness and healing. If they have sinned, they do not beat themselves up and wallow in self-pity. The believer who struggles with feelings of low self worth has not grasped the significance of grace. Grace is the total removal of the condemnation of your sin but you have also been given the righteousness of Christ. You are fully worthy in the eyes of the Lord and to say otherwise is to diminish God’s amazing grace. You have been adopted into God’s family and the Lord is truly your father, as Hosea wrote, “for in you the fatherless finds compassion.” This wise and discerning person abides in the presence of the Lord and feasts on the Lord’s abundance. And as verse nine summarizes, the wise and discerning person walks in the ways of the Lord.

This describes Joseph to a tee. He was faithful in his father’s house, obeying Jacob’s commands and serving as a son. Joseph was faithful in Potiphar’s house. The Lord was with him and

blessed Joseph but Joseph responded to the Lord's goodness with obedience and faithfulness. Joseph was faithful in prison and the Lord granted success in all that he did. When Joseph was able to interpret the dream and offer a complete solution to the crisis, it was obvious to Pharaoh and his officials that Joseph was a wise and discerning man. And the evidence of this is the position and power that Pharaoh gave to Joseph.

Remember when I said how remarkable it was that Pharaoh would ask a Joseph for help in the first place? Joseph was not Egyptian and was therefore considered unclean. Joseph was a slave with no rights and he was a prisoner accused of the most horrendous crimes. Only the goodness and sovereignty of God could have brought such a set of circumstances about. But more staggering than asking him for help with the dream was appointing him as second in command of Egypt. We must understand that Pharaoh's confidence in Joseph related specifically to both his accurate prediction of the future as well as his ability to carry out the massive plan. In order for any of this to have happened, Pharaoh had to believe that Joseph was accurately predicting the next fourteen years of world events. He had to have every confidence in the fact that a seven year famine was coming. He had to have every confidence that seven years of abundance was just beginning. I cannot think of any other story in Scripture that matches this one. Of course we have many prophecies that foretell events hundreds or thousands of years in the future but I don't know of any story when an unbeliever put such faith in the prophecy of any Israelite. Against all odds, Pharaoh was convinced.

We see the principle of stewardship so evident once again. With Potiphar Joseph was given stewardship over everything and everyone and now with Pharaoh Joseph was given stewardship over everything and everyone. Only Pharaoh himself possessed more power than Joseph. This is just one way that Jesus taught about stewardship. "One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own?" (Luke 16:10-12—ESV) Joseph was faithful with little and was therefore entrusted with much. Joseph was just as faithful in prison as he was in Pharaoh's court. He wasn't one kind of man in prison and another kind after rising to power. He was the same everywhere he went and everything he did. In other words, Joseph had integrity. The word integrity is related to the word integer—meaning a whole number. A man or woman with integrity is whole in the sense that they are not one kind of person in private and another in public. Would you say that you are a whole person in this sense? A person that doesn't have much integrity can't necessarily ask other people if they have integrity because the secret parts of their character are kept hidden from others. So the question must be answered by each individual. Are you a whole person? Are you a person of integrity? Are you faithful in the small things that no one ever sees?

O good way to evaluate your level of integrity is with the twin sins of gossip and flattery. Gossip is saying things behind a person's back that you would never say to their face and flattery is saying things to a person's face that you wouldn't bother saying behind their back. If you practice gossip or flattery, you are a divided person. You are not whole. You lack integrity.

We are allowed to peer into Joseph's character in a few more ways. After he is given the power to rule and sets his plan into motion, he is given an Egyptian wife of noble birth who bears two

sons for Joseph. *Joseph named his firstborn Manasseh and said, "It is because God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father's household."* Notice how much we can learn from the name of this first child who was named forgot. With a name like that, do you think Joseph would ever forget it? ☺ Joseph would not forget his son's name but he did forget his trouble and his father's house. Did Joseph have a lot of trouble in his life? Most of his trouble came from his father's household, specifically his evil brothers. Can you forget such betrayal?

The brothers surely didn't forget about it. They held on to the memory and the guilt for decades, so how was Joseph able to forget the pain? I think we understand that he didn't actually forget the incident but he did forgive the offenders. But did it take his rise to power before he could forgive? Is that what helped him forget his troubles, when he realized that all of the pain served a higher purpose? That is how we tend to view tragedies, isn't it? If a young man dies on the battle field, it is tragic but at least it was done in the service and protection of our country and its people, but if the same young man is killed by a drunk driver, we can't make any sense out of it. We don't see any purpose to the suffering. Is this how Joseph overcame his grief—because God prospered him in the end? No. That's not at all how it worked? And how do I know this? Because Joseph had been walking in the ways of the Lord for the past thirteen years. Don't forget the reason Joseph was thrown into prison—because he feared God far more than he feared man. He was willing to suffer for doing good. I don't think he forgave his brothers after Manasseh was born. I think he forgave them in Potiphar's house ten years earlier.

But he had lost so much. His troubles were many and great. Betrayed by his brothers. Dragged into a life of slavery with no rights. Leaving his homeland—the promised land—never to return again. He lost his inheritance and thought he would never see his father again. All of this trauma and grief was brought on by those ten brothers. How do you lose so much and still forgive? We all struggle with this. If you know me, you know that I am no proponent of the prosperity gospel. It is a false gospel. John Piper is known for his condemnation of the same, but listen to what he has to say in this [Video clip](#).

When we lose something that is dear to us there is pain involved—the more precious the loss, the greater the pain. Many in this room have experienced great loss, but are we like Piper asserts, all closet followers of prosperity? Do we follow God because things are going well, when we are happy and healthy and life is good? There is nothing wrong with desiring these things. Joseph did not desire slavery and imprisonment. Joseph did not desire to be betrayed and falsely accused but neither did he demand that God not give them to him. By the time his first son was born he had worked through the pain of his accumulated losses and had forgiven the offenders.

Then Joseph had a second son whose name also revealed more about his inner life. *The second son he named Ephraim and said, "It is because God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering."* Joseph did not demand that God give him only prosperity but he was able to thank God when he did prosper him.

We can turn once again to Jesus' teaching.

"I tell you the truth," Jesus said to them, "no one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God ³⁰ will fail to receive many times as much in this age and, in the age to come, eternal life." (Luke 18:29-30)

It took me a while to see the part of this verse where Jesus said “in this age.” I have always known that we are guaranteed rewards in heaven for sacrifices that we make in this life. Jesus also commands believers to “store up treasures in heaven.” This life is passing away and the few years that we do have are difficult. We are wrong if we do not dedicate our primary focus to our heavenly existence but it is also wrong if we skip over the temporal blessings that the Lord wants to give us. Jesus is promising us that we will receive these blessings in this age. Our faithfulness is rewarded in the next life but God will also prosper us in this life. False prosperity thinking demands that we not suffer at all in this life, that we are healthy and wealthy at all times and this is folly. But it is equally folly to say that we must expect suffering at every turn, that we must endure daily pain and loss and then we die.

Does this mean that if I give up a \$100,000 home to become a missionary that God will give me a \$400,000 home when I return? Jesus is not a heavenly slot machine where you put in a quarter and ten more drop out the bottom, but he has promised to bless our faithfulness. And this is what Joseph recognized, that God had made him fruitful in the land of his suffering. Isn't it interesting how Joseph worded that—that his fruitfulness was in the land of his suffering? He was indeed fruitful and prosperous and powerful, but he still didn't have his family. He was still locked in a foreign land.

That's a good way to understand our sojourn in this life. We live in the land of suffering yet God has prospered us in every way. We may not have suffered to the same degree as Joseph, but as long as we are clothed with our earthly bodies we will be living in the land of our suffering—the land cursed by sin and doomed to destruction. But we are fruitful in this land and as we give up things for the kingdom of God and as we display faithfulness and stewardship of what he has given us the fruit will increase to our benefit and to God's glory.

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