

*God's Detours*

One of the most frustrating things that can happen when you are driving your car is to come to a sign that says "detour." Ever been there? If you are like me your are tempted to go on around the detour sign and see if you can get through somehow. Detours block the way that we are trying to go and often take us miles out of our way. Detours make us want to grumble and complain.

But finally, after we've followed that detour with all its turns and winding roads, we find ourselves far up the road from where we were, and well on our way to where we want to be.

We don't like the detours but they're designed to get us around danger and move us up the road.

Well, life can be filled with detours, God's roadblocks to move us around danger and to build character in our life.

We don't always like them. In fact, our first response is usually to see them as some sort of intrusion into our lives. We want to plow right on through.

But God's goal is to build spiritual character in His children and detours are often the most effective way to accomplish that goal.

God's great and overriding purpose for our lives is that we be like Jesus in our attitudes and actions.

Romans 8 tells us that God has predetermined that we should be conformed to the image of His Son and that He causes all the things of life to work together to develop that Christlikeness through this life.

That means that when God takes us down a detour of life that is hard, rough and dusty He's doing it to cultivate the characteristics of Christ in our life.

Now, in our study of the life of Joseph we've come to a rough, hard detour that's going to look like it sidetracks Joseph.

Joseph was part of the family of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He was part of the family that would be ancestors of Jesus Christ Himself.

Joseph had been sold into slavery by his own brothers and carried into Egypt. It looked for a while like things were definitely going down hill then he was purchased off the slave block by a man named Potiphar.

Potiphar was the captain of the guards to Pharaoh himself. He was one of the most influential men in the country and probably one of the richest.

Over time as God blessed Joseph's hard work Potiphar gave Joseph more and more responsibility until he finally made him the manager of his whole household.

Potiphar completely trusted Joseph and gave him almost complete authority in the house. Things were definitely looking up.

There was just one problem, Potiphar's wife. She set her eyes on this young, good looking, Hebrew servant and tried to entice him. Finally, after he literally ran out of her presence, in anger she falsely accused Joseph of trying to commit immorality with her and Potiphar had Joseph thrown into prison.

Talk about a detour.

Now God had a purpose for Joseph. He had made him some very special promises.

Joseph didn't know the details of what was to happen, just that he was to have some kind of authority. What God was really preparing Joseph for was the position of second in command to Pharaoh.

He was going to end up as second in command of the most powerful, influential country of the world. And in that position he was going to provide protection for his father and brothers so that they and their descendants might go on over the years to grow in to the nation of Israel.

That was God's plan. But not just anybody could fit into a situation like that. God had to develop Joseph's character. He had to prepare him. And that's what this detour was all about.

Before any of us can take over a position of authority and do a job for God, we have to learn humility.

That was God's purpose for Joseph. So here he was a man who lived righteously but was falsely accused. Taken from a life of wealth and ease and thrown into a dark dirty rat infested prison.

We're not told here in Genesis how he was treated but as we saw last week Psalm 105:18 tells us *They hurt his feet with fetters, He was laid in irons.*

This was a horrible time. A lot worse than I think any of us imagine just reading a few brief words from Genesis.

Earlier Joseph had experienced the test of adversity when he was hated by his own brothers and sold as a slave. Then he had experienced the test of his flesh when Potiphar's wife tried to entice him. Now he faced the hardest test of all. The test of his mind. Joseph now had a lot of time to think.

Joseph might have thought "Didn't I obey my Father instead of being like my wicked brothers, and what did I get out of it? Then I obeyed God and resisted temptation and where did that get me? Here I sit in prison with no hope of ever getting out."

What a depressing, humbling situation. Now the choice was Joseph's. He could worship God, or he could curse Him. He could praise God, or he could be angry at God.

He could be like Job and say *Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him*(Job 13:15), or could completely give up on God.

Just kind of looking at how you've handled life in the past, what do you think you'd do?

What we're going to see here is that Joseph didn't fall for Satan's lies. He didn't give up on God and God didn't give up on him.

### **Open Bible to Genesis 39 page 38**

When God sends us through a detour that's hard and uncomfortable, He doesn't just stand back and watch us struggle. His detours are designed to change us and so he goes right along with us to support us and see us through.

*I. God Goes With Us On Those Detours Of Life*

**Read verses 21 - 23**

God has been with Joseph in the house of Potiphar, even in the middle of temptation, and God was with Joseph in prison. God didn't send Joseph to prison, He went with him.

Regardless of the difficulty of the events of his life, Joseph was able to remain in fellowship with God because he didn't give in to sin.

Joseph was walking in the light. He was walking with God even though the path took him into prison.

Even though the path took him into a situation with no apparent way out. So even though there was physical darkness around him, he was in the middle of spiritual light.

You know, when we're really caught up with God and He's the focal point of our life, all places and all experiences of life are pretty much the same.

In the New Testament, in Acts 16, when Paul and Silas were beaten for speaking openly about Christianity and thrown into prison they sang praises to God because they knew that God was with them.

Now you might say, "Well I couldn't take all that. I couldn't bear up under all that pressure." Maybe you couldn't. Maybe I couldn't, I don't know.

But see God never allows us to be tempted beyond what we're able to bear.

And so Joseph's testing, the development of his life at this point, was totally God designed and suited for him. It was going to achieve what God needed to accomplish in his life.

Those detours are in the hands of God. In this case humility was impressed into Joseph. And as he gained what he needed to gain, God began to take the pressure off and so we find Joseph even prospering in prison.

Well, in the course of his imprisonment two significant people were thrown in with him.

*I. God Goes With Us On Those Detours Of Life*

*II. The Smallest Circumstances In Life Have Meaning In The Plan Of God*

**Read verses 40:1-4**

Prison was tough but Joseph didn't change his approach to life. He practiced the same standards of faithfulness there that he always had. He was faithful in the little things as well as the big things because God often uses little thing to get His work done.

And remember, faithfulness in little things may seem like a little thing but to God faithfulness in little things is a big thing. If we're not faithful in the small stuff in life you can be sure we'll never be faithful in the big things.

Joseph faithfully served God by serving others. So who does God put under his care but the king's butler and baker.

Now, at first we might be tempted to see these things and say, "Boy, it's nice that everything works out so neatly in these Bible stories. God keeps putting all these little things into place until in the end presto changeo! Everything turns out ok."

"But it doesn't work that way for me. My situations go on and on. I don't see the light at the end of the tunnel."

"Everything isn't just falling together in a neat little package that you can wrap up in a nice bow."

Do you ever feel like that?

Remember, we're getting what sometimes took years and years to happen all compressed down to a few verses. And the key to God working out all the pieces of the puzzle was Joseph's willingness to walk with God no mater what. He remained faithful, so God could work through these things and Joseph was a part of them.

The key is, our faithfulness in our situation. See as we are faithful to God He will faithfully minister to us.

Even though we may not understand how God can use a particular thing, or person, or event to work out His glory, we need to realize that He's at work in our lives and to the degree we remain faithful to Him that is the degree to which we'll learn what He's trying to teach us.

So here we find these two men, in what seemed like a coincidence, confined in prison with Joseph.

**Read verses 5-7**

The chief butler of Pharaoh was the overseer of his vineyards and wine cellar, as well as his personal cup bearer. That means that he tasted everything first to make sure all the drinks served to the king were a good quality, plus that they weren't poisoned.

The chief baker was responsible in the same way for the food that Pharaoh ate. We don't know what their offences were, but it seems that both were charged with crimes punishable by death and were being kept until their guilt or innocence could be established.

Both men dreamed dreams that bothered them. They couldn't get these dreams out of their minds.

Notice they didn't come to Joseph with their dreams but he saw them moping around, looking troubled so he asked them "Why are you so down?"

God was cultivating a sensitivity for people in Joseph's life. That was something that he'd need to have when he got into his future place of leadership.

### **Read verse 8**

Dreams were considered very significant in Egypt, so it is no surprise that these two were so upset because they couldn't understand what their dreams meant.

What is surprising, or at least encouraging and exciting, is that Joseph was walking so close to God.

At this point I might have been a bit cynical. I might have said, "You know, I've had enough of dreams. They've been my problem from the beginning." But Joseph didn't.

God was real to him all of the time.

Now, a psychologist might explain a dream as the effects of the subconscious. A doctor might attribute it to the lousy prison diet.

But in the days when the Bible didn't exist as the guide to God's ways, God used the natures of two unsaved men with their superstitions and their fears to deliver Joseph.

He used the combination of circumstances, superstitions, and the faithfulness of Joseph to show that no knowledge exists but His, and that no power can stop His will from being accomplished.

If these men would have still been in Pharaoh's court, they would have asked one of the court wise men or magician for an interpretation but here they were in prison with no one to ask, so they sat on the side of their bunks looking dejected.

Joseph asks the men to tell him their dreams, and the obvious intent is he's going to seek out God's interpretation.

He would have never done that if he had harbored doubts or resentment about his own dreams. But he believed God. He didn't allow Satan to cause him to doubt God's goodness and sovereignty.

First the butler told his dream to Joseph.

### **Read verses 9-11**

Joseph gave him the interpretation.

### **Read verses 12 & 13**

Apparently this guy was innocent and now it is confirmed that in three days he'd be back to his duties as the cupbearer of Pharaoh.

That was been good news for the butler. There would be one thing that would be different though, after he was reinstated in Pharaoh's court he'd have memories of time spent in prison. Something he never had before.

### **So Joseph says... Read verses 14 & 15**

These verses are here to let us know the heart and the thoughts of Joseph. Here was a possible way out and Joseph wanted to go for it.

Some people think that suffering or adversity could never be part of God's will for our life or else it would be wrong to try to relieve the suffering or escape the adversity. But that is not a biblical principal.

In the New testament book of I Corinthians there's a whole section on remaining in the situation you were in when you became a believer and being faithful to God there.

When it comes to slaves, who were all over the place in the Roman Empire, it says be godly and faithful as a slave, but if you get the chance to be free take it.

In other words, it might have been God's will for a man in the Roman Empire to be a

slave for a period of time but, that didn't mean it had to be permanent.

That just might have been the detour in life that allowed him to hear the Good News of Jesus Christ.

The same is true of us. If we are in adversity, it doesn't hurt to take a way out if it's biblical and the opportunity is there.

Joseph didn't like being in prison. He didn't say, "I'm here because of God's will so I just want to stay here the rest of my life." So he asked the butler to remember him when he got out of jail.

You know, no matter what you might be going through God knows how you feel. The Bible says *As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust.* (Psalm 103:13-14 NIV)

God isn't there just waiting to drop the ax on us at the slightest provocation. In Jesus Christ He was in all points tempted like we are. He knows how we feel. It was right for Joseph to try this way out of his situation.

In fact, the very fact that Joseph asked the butler to remember him when he got out showed his explicate faith that he had God's interpretation of the butler's dream. Joseph had confidence that it was going to come to pass exactly as He had said.

By now the chief baker was getting excited. The butler had gotten good news so he anxiously shares his dream too. Both of them had something to do with three.

### **Read verses 16 - 19**

I'm sure Joseph would probably have much preferred to give this guy a good word too, but he had to be faithful to the truth. He might have gotten in better with both of these important officers if he had said good things to both, but he didn't pick and choose when it came to the truth.

We can't either. There is heaven and there is hell. There is blessing but there is also judgment. Joseph was a man of the whole truth. We don't need to buy into the latest pop psychology or political correctness. We need to hold onto the truth.

The interpretation of the dreams came to pass exactly as Joseph had said.

## Read verses 20 - 22

I can just imagine that day the prison doors swung open and the butler was allowed to go free. I can see him waving goodbye to Joseph, giving him a high five and telling him, "Don't worry, I won't forget you."

And then the doors were closed again and Joseph was still inside.

The days went by, then the weeks, then the months. Joseph must have wondered just how long it was going to be.

*I. God Goes With Us On Those Detours Of Life*

*II. The Smallest Circumstances In Life Have Meaning In The Plan Of God*

*III. Even When The Detour Seems Long And Unbearable, God's Timing Is Always Best*

The story closes with these pathetic words... **Read verse 23**

Joseph learned something absolutely crucial during this time. He learned that his help wasn't going to come through man.

Here's Joseph's umpteenth chance to chuck in the towel in total despair. But he didn't do it. It would be another 700 years before David ever penned the words of Psalm 42 but Joseph had already learned their truth.

*As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God. (Psalm 42:1&5 NIV)*

Joseph must have been tempted to hate the world and surround himself with a wall of bitterness and self-pity.

Instead he stayed firm, waiting for God to bring him through the detour back out on the main road again. But remember, for two years he sat in the prison, after he thought he was going to get out. Two important years that were foundational to the rest of his life.

There's one dominant thought that runs through this chapter on Joseph's imprisonment and it's the relation of God to the ordinary life of his people, especially in a time of suffering, sorrow, hardship and disappointment. The detours of life.

Let me leave you with three things we can learn from the story of Joseph, things that we can remind ourselves of and be comforted by. These are from Chuck Swindoll.

1. *God's way is wisest.* The jail was a place where Joseph was fitted for his life work. Most people would say it was just a run of bad luck. To Joseph it was part of the providence of God.
2. *God's time is best.* Each set back for Joseph must have looked dark and threatening. But afterward Joseph fully understood that God's time of deliverance was the best.
3. *God's grace is sufficient* In spite of everything that was against him, Joseph made it by the grace of God.

The detours, the trials, teach us that God goes with us and sees us through the toughest of times. His grace is sufficient for every need.

We're forgiven because of God's grace shown to us in Jesus Christ. God calls to to live every day by that same grace.