

How To Handle Prosperity

When you think of life's tests, what comes to mind? Don't we usually think of trials, adversity, hardship, and problems?

Testing is part of life. But a true follower of God can face that testing with an entirely different attitude than a person who doesn't know God.

If you have trusted in Jesus Christ as your Savior, if you've realized your own sin and the fact that Jesus died to pay for your sin, then you belong to God in a very special relationship, a father and child relationship.

According to the Bible, our Heavenly Father only uses testing and trials to purify and to strengthen our lives. Hardship and adversity aren't designed to punish us but to purify us.

That idea kind of jumps off the page at us when we study the life of Joseph in the book of Genesis. We're in a study of Genesis and as we've worked our way through the last few chapters we've seen that Joseph has been through some severe testing. But it refined his character and equipped him to do the job that God is going to eventually have for him.

First there was the test of rejection. Joseph and his brothers are part of the ancestry of Israel and the forefathers of Jesus. When Joseph was rejected by his own family, his faith saw him through that test.

Next was the test of humiliation when he was beaten, sold as a slave, and treated like an animal instead of a human being. Again he triumphed through faith.

Then came the test of temptation and the incident with Potiphar's wife. But Joseph's faith brought him through that situation without compromise.

From there he was thrown into prison and faced the test of being falsely accused. In faith he endured again and even seemed to grow stronger. While I'm sure he had plenty of questions for God, any thoughts of bitterness or resentment were put aside and his character was developed.

Next came the test of depression, when for 2 years the man that was humanly speaking, “his ticket out of jail,” forgot all about him.

Again Joseph walked by faith. And in the darkest hours when things seemed the bleakest, Joseph leaned heavily on his faith and on his God.

This morning we’re going to find Joseph face one of the greatest tests of all, the test of success, prosperity, and power. We don’t usually think of prosperity as a test. We put affluence over in the “blessing” category but the truth is, it’s the hardest test of all.

Joseph’s been through rejection, humiliation, imprisonment and temptation. And those were really tough. But I think the test of success is the hardest of all.

Can Joseph make it through? A lot of people fall at this one. Let's see how Joseph manages to handle himself here.

Open Bible to Genesis 41 page 39

In Genesis chapter 41, verse 1, our study begins again with dreams, and dreams will play an important part in this section of Joseph's life.

We're going to tackle the subject matter contained in 57 verses so obviously we're not going to read each verse and comment but follow along as we try to get a feel for what's going on.

In the first 7 verses we learn that Pharaoh had 2 dreams.

Read verses 1 - 7

It’s been two years since Pharaoh's butler promised to put in a good word for Joseph. Joseph has been in prison for at least three years altogether and it was thirteen years ago that his brothers sold him into slavery. Joseph is now about 30 years old.

Pharaoh has two dreams. The dreams are typically Egyptian. The river was the Nile River and he saw cows and grain.

In the eighth verse of the chapter, we read... **Read verse 8**

Egyptian magicians were trained in all of the practices of the occult including the interpretation of dreams. These were the sages of Egypt who read the stars and told the future, but in this case none of them could interpret the dreams.

And Pharaoh even told them his dreams. He wasn't like Nebuchadnezzar who had a dream that troubled him. He told his wise men to tell him the dream, that way he'd know that they knew what they were talking about. They all said, "Tell us the dream and we'll tell you the interpretation. We'll make something up for you."

The meaning of these dreams seems almost obvious but no one could tell Pharaoh what they were about. As powerful as Satan and the powers of darkness are, God is the ultimate authority over them. And here He withholds their understanding so no one can interpret these troubling dreams because God has someone else to use.

When the wise men and the magicians couldn't interpret the dreams all of a sudden someone standing in Pharaoh's court has his memory jogged.

Read verses 9 - 14

The Egyptians were extremely conscientious when it came to cleanliness. Men only let their hair and beards grow during times of mourning. So Joseph shaves and gets cleaned up and ready to appear before the King.

Read verse 15

"Joseph I've heard that you're like my magicians, only maybe even better and wiser."

Now that was a flattering thing to say and it must have been tempting to say, "You're right, I'm the top of the line dream interpreter," to get on Pharaoh's good side.

But Joseph doesn't do that. He sets the record straight right from the beginning.

Read verse 16

Joseph had a priority, giving God honor. And so instead of taking any glory that was due God he started right off giving the credit to God.

You know one of the reasons why Joseph was so used of God and blessed? Because he gave God the glory for what he did.

Joseph was a usable instrument for God. So Pharaoh reports his dreams to Joseph. and as he hears the dreams immediately Joseph has a message for the King of Egypt.

Read verse 25

The two dreams are really one. In verse 32 Joseph says... **Read verse 32**

One of the ways that Joseph discerned that these dreams were from God was the fact that there were two dreams with the same message.

That was one of God's common ways of confirming that dreams were from him in Old Testament times. He gave two dreams with the same message, one right, after another to confirm the fact that that dream didn't come from overeating last night, or from guilt, or fear but that the dream came from God.

So Joseph says you had two dreams but there's really only one message and the fact that there are two dreams demonstrates that it is from God and it will surely come to pass.

Then he proceeds to interpret the dreams. The 7 cows and the 7 heads of grain represent 7 years. Seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine.

And at this point Joseph recommends a natural plan for dealing with the coming famine.

Read verses 33 - 36

It's hard to put ourselves in the place of Bible characters like Joseph because their cultures are so far removed from ours.

But think for a moment about what Joseph had done. He had been brought before the most powerful man in the world.

Pharaoh must have been an impressive sight to see. He wore a long, fluted skirt made of priceless Egyptian linen. He had golden sandals on his feet.

On his head was the double crown that signified the union of Upper and Lower Egypt. On the imperial brow was the twin insignia of the two lands, the falcon and the snake. In the one hand was the crook for Upper Egypt in the other the flail for lower Egypt.

Pharaoh was considered a priest-king, the incarnate of the sun god Ra, the mediator between his people and the spirits.

How Satan must have whispered in Joseph's ear "don't blow it now!" Don't preach to this fellow about God. Remember he thinks he's a god and he's not exactly anxious to hear about any competition. He'll have your head as soon as look at you if you insult

him in his own court.”

But Joseph hadn't been in God's school of preparation for all those years for nothing. So in a sense he dethroned Pharaoh and put the true and living God in absolute control.

“God is in control of this nation, even the weather and the Nile itself. Here's His plan for saving your nation.”

Well, Pharaoh listened to what has happened. He recognizes that there is something supernatural about the insights of this 30 year old Hebrew standing before him.

So... **Read verses 37 - 39** “Discerning and wise,” the same two qualities that Joseph had told Pharaoh to look for in his ruler.

Read verses 40 - 41 Pharaoh figures if God gave Joseph this wisdom he'll give him the ability to carry out this plan.

Joseph in this moment is elevated from a prisoner to the second in command in Egypt.

Now there are some symbols given to Joseph.

Read verses 42 - 44

The hands that were rough and calloused as a slave were now adorned with the king's ring. Joseph's neck had been taken out of prison fetters and a gold chain was placed around it.

Joseph had lost his special coat 13 years earlier when his brothers took it in anger and jealousy. Later his outer garment was left in the hands of Potiphar's wife as he ran from her. But now Joseph was clothed in garments of fine linen.

Once Joseph was treated like dirt by the Egyptians but now all Egypt was commanded to bow before him as he rode on the second chariot as the Prime Minister of Egypt.

You can just imagine what must have happened that night when Potiphar went home for supper. Remember he was captain of Pharaoh's personal guard so he would have been an eye witness to all of this.

He probably sat his wife down and said, “Remember that Hebrew slave we had around here 3 years ago that you accused of trying to hit on you? The Pharaoh just

made him prime minister of the nation and I'm to report to him in the morning." I have the feeling she didn't sleep to well that night.

In order to make Joseph more socially acceptable to the Egyptians, who were proud and had an aversion to foreigners, Pharaoh proceeds to give Joseph an Egyptian name and an Egyptian wife.

Joseph is elevated to the second most important position in the world at that time. Now the pieces of the puzzle began to fall into place.

All of those ugly, misfitting, pieces of the last 13 years began to fit together and now he began to see the completed plan of what God had been working in his life during these 13 years. The rejection by his brothers, the sale into slavery, the false accusation, the forgetfulness of the butler, all of the disciplines of imprisonment. Now Joseph begins to see the picture.

13 years long! And finally it comes together!

We want everything right now don't we? How many of us would be faithful worshippers for 13 years, resisting the temptation to throw in the towel and call it quits?

All of this took place because Joseph made it his top priority to please God. Most of us are still in God's school learning the lessons of life. How are we getting along? Are we preparing for graduation day? Or are we failing the tests God sends our way?

Joseph saw the completed pattern. But remember, he didn't see it for 13 years. Those 13 years were characterized by a walk of faith. But now, even as the pattern is completed, Joseph faces another crucial test. And in some ways this is the hardest one yet. It's the test of prosperity.

The question now before Joseph was, would he be able to accept prosperity and still keep his heart right with God? He was only 30 years old at this time and his new position of prosperity could have easily turned his attention away from spiritual things.

The greatest danger to the church of Jesus Christ isn't poverty, it's not trials, it's not persecution, it is prosperity.

Joseph was now a successful, influential, authoritative, wealthy man, and he faces a test.

He faces a test that we all face. We grumble about not being able to make end's meet, and stretching the budget and all of that. But the truth is that the poorest among us is dazzlingly rich in the eyes of billions of people in our world.

By almost any standard we are a very prosperous people even in the midst of a recession. Of all the peoples of the world, materially and in other areas, we are a very prosperous people. And we face the same type of test that Joseph faced.

I. There Are 3 Major Dangers In Prosperity

First, it can corrupt our character. If we're not careful it can lead to laziness and weakness.

Our nation at times seems weak and fat and lazy. Our churches as a whole seem to be growing weak and fat and lazy.

Joseph didn't fall there. He worked hard for the next 7 years, the years of plenty. He didn't dawdle around, immersed in luxury.

Read verse 46 - 49

His character wasn't corrupted by his position of authority and influence.

But there is more than that. What was it that motivated Joseph?

I love the point that Bill McRae makes.

He says, Think about what Joseph was doing at this time. He was actually rearranging the whole structure of the nation of Egypt.

And when anybody came to him and said, "Joseph what's the basis for what you are doing here?" His answer would be "A couple of dreams!"

You mean that we are doing all this hard work and having this massive program and changing our whole national economic policy because of a couple of dreams?

Joseph was a firmly committed man.

Just suppose President Obama got up in a nationally televised press conference and some asks him "Mr. President, what is the basis for your national policy decisions." And he said, "I had a dream and this came out in the interpretation."

Could you imagine what mocking and derision he would face?

Joseph must have faced that too. But he was so committed to God that he kept on moving ahead. His character wasn't corrupted. He wasn't corrupted by the influence authority and prosperity that God had brought his way. Why not?

Why has it happened so often in the church? Just read church history and it seems like many of the lowest points for the church have been during times of prosperity and freedom.

Why is it that our character (our integrity, our courage and our humility) can be corrupted by just a little bit of prosperity?

Joseph wasn't.

The first danger in success and prosperity is that it so easily corrupts our character.

The second danger is it undermines the concept of faith.

This was Jesus' constant message in the gospels and it's carried over into the epistles.

One-third of Jesus parables deals with possessions. One out of 6 verses in the gospels deals with money and possessions. And the repeated warning is that people who have affluence and wealth are apt to be weak in faith.

Success tends to, and works toward, eliminating faith.

In Deuteronomy Moses warns the people before they go into the promised land and he says, watch out when you build your homes and your barns are bursting at the seams, watch out lest you forget the Lord your God!

Prosperity tends to promote pride and self-dependence and it works that way in churches. When you have a lot you tend not to pray as much. When you have a lot you begin to think you can make it on your own.

When John writes to affluent Laodicea in the book of Revelation he begins by saying *Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'--and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked.* (Revelation 3:17)

The Bible is full of examples of people trusting in uncertain riches but it didn't happen Joseph. He maintained a healthy sense of dependence on God.

Look at verse 50... **Read verses 50 - 52**

In his prosperity and his success Joseph hasn't forgotten God. He acknowledges that it is the hand of God that's established him in life.

One of the writers of Proverbs knew the danger of success. In 30:8 he wrote *Give me neither poverty nor riches-- Feed me with the food allotted to me; Lest I be full and deny You, And say, "Who is the LORD?" Or lest I be poor and steal, And profane the name of my God.*

In my 30+ years of being in the ministry I've never heard anyone actually pray like that. "Lord don't give me too much materially because I don't want wealth to hinder my relationship with you."

Joseph was full but he didn't deny God. Joseph knew how quickly God can put you up and how quickly he can bring you down.

He'd already gone from slave to steward of the captain of the guard, to prisoner, to prime minister. He wasn't going to forget God.

His faith grew, rather than being weakened. How did Joseph do it? What kept him strong?

Well, prosperity has a third danger to it. It not only tends to corrupt character, it not only tends to eliminate faith - but it tends also to promote selfishness.

The more influential, successful, authoritative, wealthy a person becomes the more selfish he tends to become.

It's happened to nations throughout history.

A Roman writer in the First Century BC wrote, "May it please heaven that I'm a liar but I see Rome, proud Rome, falling as a sacrifice to it's prosperity."

It happened in Rome. I believe it's happening in our country. But it didn't happen in Joseph's life.

Seven years of famine follow. And for 7 years Joseph dedicates himself to managing the grain in the storehouses. And the whole time he never takes anything for himself. He cares for the people and their children and in chapter 47 the people say, *You have saved our lives. you have become our savior.*

How did Joseph triumph over all these dangers of success? All these tendencies to corruption and faithlessness and selfishness?

I. There Are 3 Major Dangers In Prosperity

II. There Are 3 Reasons Why Joseph Succeeded

A. The training God had given to Joseph. He knew what it was to be a slave, to be humiliated and through it all God was molding Joseph.

Don't buck God when the trials come, learn from them. Even when they seem hopeless with no way out.

There were probably plenty of other times when Joseph could have been tempted to doubt along the way but now he could say "Thank you Lord for the trials as well as the blessings. Thank you for teaching me humility."

Joseph used his trials for stepping stones rather than allowing them to become stumbling blocks. And by the way, they'll either be one or the other in your life.

B. Joseph recognizes God's glory and puts honoring Him as the main priority in his life.

That is so crucial. Reverence, fear, respect, hunger for God protects us. That is the kind of man Joseph was.

Then there is a 3rd reason why Joseph stood the test.

C. He saw the hand of God in all that happened.

It wasn't Joseph. It wasn't his ability or his wisdom. It was God at work.

The same has to be true of us. We have to recognize the finger prints of God in all the affairs of our life. Then we will be suited to stand the test of success and prosperity.

The church is failing that test in America today. Many of our families are failing that test.

May God instill within us the wisdom to view life like Joseph did. To remain humble and willing servants of God.

The most valuable thing that we can ever have isn't our stuff. That can be gone over

night. The most valuable thing we have is forgiveness of our sins and the promise of a home in heaven.

Isn't it telling that the most valuable thing is something we can't earn or ever deserve. The Bible says *For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.* (Ephesians 2:8-9)