



Abandoned by God?

Gen 39:20-41:57

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In previous lessons, Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers, and in Egypt he became the household servant of a soldier named Potiphar. Then Potiphar's wife falsely accused Joseph of attempted rape, and so Potiphar had Joseph thrown into prison. In this passage we find Joseph in an even lower position in Egypt than where he began, demoted from slave to prisoner. He can't win for losing.

“Good Luck” vs. “The Lord Be With You”

Do you ever feel things couldn't get any worse, only to find that they have? Do you ever feel as if your luck has run out? We might be tempted to read Joseph's story this way, as a run of bad luck. But that's not the way the story is told.

Throughout the events of Gen 40, tension builds as Joseph's situation looks increasingly hopeful. First Joseph is assigned to the king's officials, the cupbearer and the chief baker. Then he hears and interprets their dreams, first for the cupbearer's restoration, and second for the baker's execution. Then these interpretations are fulfilled. The baker is dead, but the cupbearer is once again at the king's right hand, and of course we remember Joseph's request in 40:14-15:

But when all goes well with you, remember me and show me kindness; mention me to Pharaoh and get me out of this prison. For I was forcibly carried off from the land of the Hebrews, and [like you] I have done nothing to deserve being put in a dungeon.

The cupbearer, like Joseph, was wrongly imprisoned. But now he is restored to Pharaoh's right hand, and there is no way that he would forget his mate, Joseph. Is there?

The chief cupbearer, however, did not remember Joseph; he forgot him. 40:23

Poor Joseph. Again, we might be tempted to read Joseph's story as an absurd run of bad luck. But that's not the way the story is told. This part of the story begins in 39:21 with God's perspective. It's very important to begin reading there, with the narrator's commentary, rather than Gen 40 where the events of the story continue.

21 The LORD was with [Joseph]; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden. 22 So the warden put Joseph in charge of all those held in the prison, and he was made responsible for all that was done there. 23 The warden paid no attention to anything under Joseph's care, because the LORD was with Joseph

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and gave him success in whatever he did.

This little paragraph changes everything. Think about it: Where would you rather be? Free? Or in prison? Think again. Where would you rather be? With God in prison? Or alone and free?

This question gets at the heart of what Christianity is all about. The world has no other basis for evaluating someone's life except circumstances. A good life is a life of good fortune and vice versa. The Christian, on the other hand, evaluates life on the basis of whether it is lived with God. When you go to your high school reunion and catch up with all your old friends, the winners aren't necessarily the ones who had successful careers and beautiful families. The winners are those who, regardless of circumstances, have been with God. Some of them may appear lucky, others unlucky. But appearances are often deceptive. What matters is whether the Lord was with them.

How do you feel about your own life right now? Have you been misled into prioritizing external appearances? It's time to dig deeper, and to find our satisfaction in him.

Covenant Faithfulness

Once again, consider this question: Where would you rather be? With God in prison? Or alone and free? It's a tough question. Frankly, I think it would be a lot easier if we had a narrator like in Genesis, someone who regularly provided an objective report on our spiritual status, confirming that the Lord indeed is with us. But that's not the way things work for characters in a story, including all of us living this story right now. We don't get objective spiritual reports. And that's not the way it was for Joseph either. He didn't have the benefit of a narrator either, and that's exactly why we ought to read and learn from his life. He was just like us.

Gen 39:23 is more or less the last time we hear the name of the Lord in Genesis. There will be talk about God by the characters, but the narrator won't go there again. The narrator leaves it to us as the readers to decide whether the Lord was with Joseph or not. This is intentional, so that we will learn how to see the Lord at work in our own lives without the benefit of a narrator.

And so, in the absence of any objective report that the Lord was with with Joseph, what are we to assume? The remaining 20% of Genesis gives us no certainty, from the narrator's perspective, that God stuck by Joseph's side. How are we to understand this? Should we assume that the Lord abandoned Joseph?

Remember that this is Joseph ben Jacob ben Isaac ben Abraham. Remember that he was circumcised on the 8th day, and included in the covenant promises repeated to his fathers. What is Joseph to think, living as he does without the narrator's perspective? Should he assume that the Lord has abandoned him?

Sometimes in the midst of covenant living, times get tough, life gets complicated. A spouse is called away for war or business or some other unavoidable assignment. The other spouse

must stay behind. Will they remain faithful to one another night after night after night while apart? Without any objective information, it's easy for one spouse to imagine what the other spouse is doing, to assume the worst and retaliate.

Joseph begins this story in covenant with the Lord, yet times are tough. In fact, they get a lot tougher, and it seems like the Lord is absent. Will Joseph remain faithful? Will he keep his covenant promises? Or will he assume the worst, namely that he has been abandoned by God. If the latter, then the logical next step is to do the same, i.e. to abandon God in return. This makes perfect sense, if indeed he has been abandoned. But how can he be sure?

A covenant with God is fundamentally different from a covenant with another person. We have an enormous propensity to sin. With men and women, we usually have to assume the best, but plan for the worst. But when it comes to God, not only can we assume the best, we can plan for it. With God, when a covenant is made, it's settled. Permanently. Nothing can change it. It doesn't mean that life won't be difficult from that time on. In fact, living in covenant with God usually means a life of great risk in which we must walk by faith and not by sight. We must remain loyal to God without knowing our future. But in the midst of even the most difficult circumstances, we can always be certain that God's covenant remains.

What do you do when the hard times come? Perhaps you're there even now. Are you remaining faithful? Or have you assumed the worst, that you have been abandoned by God?

Without question, the most remarkable thing about Joseph is that in spite of his circumstances, he refuses to believe that God has abandoned him. At the beginning of Gen 40, Joseph has been in slavery and prison for over 10 years. It is fully two years later when Pharaoh is upset by his own dreams, the cupbearer finally remembers his prison mate, and Joseph is lifted out of the dungeon. Joseph is a model of patient certainty that God always keeps his promises. This is why he can speak with such confidence when he finally comes before Pharaoh to interpret his dreams:

41:25. God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do.

41:28. It is just as I said to Pharaoh: God has shown Pharaoh what he is about to do.

41:32. The reason the dream was given to Pharaoh in two forms is that the matter has been firmly decided by God, and God will do it soon.

And so it is that at the end of 13 years of misfortune, Joseph is still walking by faith, standing on the promises of God. After all this "bad luck," Pharaoh puts him on top, over Potiphar's wife and the cupbearer and even his family. Though the whole world may have forgotten Joseph, God didn't. God didn't abandon him.

Even though we do not see it, God is responsible for Joseph's success. Joseph isn't lucky. He's serially blessed. & each blessing comes through greater pain, frustration. "God orchestrates the most unlikely set of circumstances into an astonishing change of events that moves unerringly to redeem his elect." Bruce Waltke.

Joseph is a model for all of us who struggle to remain faithful to the Lord when the hard

times come. How can we learn from his example? How can we become more faithful to God, as Joseph was? Here are three strategies based on what we find in tonight's lessons.

1) It's Not About You: Keep your Eyes on God.

Throughout this story, Joseph remained committed to the belief that his story wasn't about him. Rather, it was about God. He was theocentric rather than egocentric. If we can learn to keep our eyes on him, we will find it a lot easier to remain faithful to God in the hard times.

E.g. Hear how Joseph responds when he has the opportunity to interpret dreams for others.

40:8. "We both had dreams," they answered, "but there is no one to interpret them." Then Joseph said to them, "Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell me your dreams."

41:15-16. Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I had a dream, and no one can interpret it. But I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it." "I cannot do it," Joseph replied to Pharaoh, "but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires."

How about us? Are we theocentric or egocentric? Who gets the credit for the good things in our lives?

Compare Joseph to Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4. Nebuchadnezzar is warned to give glory to God, but instead he says, "Look at me! I'm the emperor of the world!" He steals glory from God, and soon finds himself living as an animal. Egocentric, or theocentric?

Compare Joseph to the Rich Fool in Luke 12, who surveys his great wealth, slaps himself on the back, and determines to become even more ostentatious. Meanwhile, Jesus says, "God will call you to account this very evening." Egocentric, or theocentric?

Compare Joseph to those pastors who look out at their churches and say, "it is by my preaching, my brains, my leadership that this church has gotten this big, this wealthy, this influential." By whose hand have these things come? Take heed, pride comes before a fall. Egocentric or theocentric?

What about you? Do you have a gift from God? Are you going to take credit for it? Or are you going to give credit where credit is due?

In reading this story, Joseph would not have us celebrate him as a hero. Rather, I think he would have us recognize his virtues as God-given, and instead celebrate God, who blessed him in this way in order that God's good purposes might be worked out in the lives of many people.

When I hit a "string of bad luck," I don't find it easy to walk by faith. I find that sin is always crouching at my door, just as God said to Cain in Genesis 4:7. As soon as "my luck turns," as soon as one little thing goes wrong, I find myself wide open to attack. And then as the sin begins to pile up, I find it harder and harder to believe that God won't abandon me. But God

isn't like us. He always keeps his promises. It is God's story, rather than mine. It is God who is at work in and around us. His purposes are good. Have we forgotten this is his story we are living in? Are we keeping our eyes on him?

2) God is in Control: Be a Good Steward of your Station

Have you noticed how Joseph lives into his God-given situation everywhere he goes? He is made a slave, and so he makes the most of it. He is made a prisoner, and so he makes the most of it. Do we do this? Or do we rue our stations and slack off because we aren't in the situations we think we deserve?

When we look carefully at Joseph's story, we find again and again that things weren't as bad as they could have been. Joseph was sold into slavery, but the Lord was with him, and so he was purchased by Pharaoh's Captain of the Guard, and made given the highest position in Potiphar's estate. Then Potiphar's wife falsely accused Joseph of attempted rape, which was a capital offense in Egypt. But the Lord was with him. Potiphar didn't believe his wife, and so he put Joseph in the royal prison where he could serve persons of even greater rank than Potiphar. I'm not saying that Joseph didn't suffer injustice. But because the Lord was with him, he was able to make the most of every situation, no matter how low.

Young people flock to this city each year embarking on new careers. It's amazing how many are unwilling to start at the bottom and work their way up. It's amazing how many come with a sense of entitlement regarding rank and privilege. They must learn the hard way: life tends to go a lot better for those who don't have this sense of entitlement.

In contrast, throughout Joseph's story we are encouraged to put our gifts to use even when we think we have gotten a raw deal. Joseph could have said, "Nope. Sorry guys. I don't have any idea what these dreams mean. We're all in this together." Instead, he lives into his God-given situation and lends a hand.

It's worth noting that it's in places like these that we learn what to do with the biblical doctrine of predestination. There is no doubt throughout this entire story that God is in control. Every event is orchestrated by the Lord who keeps his promises. And that is precisely why the characters in the story must take action.

Consider what Joseph says to Pharaoh in 41:32: "These 14 years are fixed by God, and God will surely bring them to pass. Therefore, Pharaoh, you must appoint a wise man as steward over the resources of Egypt." Why must Pharaoh do this? Precisely because God keeps his promises.

Pharaoh must act by faith. He believes the cupbearer's testimony about Joseph. He believes Joseph's interpretation. The survival of the Egyptian empire and all the nations depends upon Pharaoh acting by faith.

Why must we be faithful wherever God places us? Precisely because God is in control. We are where he put us for a reason. That's why we ought to be good stewards of our stations, whether they be menial or highly exalted.

Are you the kind of person who does your job well, even when your boss isn't looking? Or are you the kind of person whom your boss has to ask for assignments again and again and again? What kind of steward are you of the place, the job, the relationships God has given you?

God is in control, so take action. Be a good steward of your God-given situation, for his glory.

3) God will not Abandon You: Put Your Hope in his Son

Ultimately, the story of Joseph's journey from slave to governor of Egypt points us forward to another story, the greatest of all stories, in which the Son of God experiences "a string of bad luck" so that God's good purposes might prevail. We see this pattern repeated throughout the OT, in Israel's later slavery and escape from Egypt. We see it in David's rise from humble shepherd to mighty king. And we see it in Jesus, born to an unwed mother in abject poverty, but eventually enters Jerusalem in triumphal procession—only to be brutally executed by the people.

His last words on the cross were taken from Psalm 22:1: *My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?*

Why did God do it? Why did God do to his own Son what he wouldn't do to Joseph? Isaiah explains it this way:

53:4 He took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, and we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. 5 He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. 6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

God abandoned his only Son, so that we might not experience his eternal abandonment. But God didn't abandon his Son forever. After 3 days, He raised Jesus from the dead, so that we might know that he keeps his promises, no matter what.

Do you feel abandoned by God? It turns out that Joseph wasn't, but Jesus was. And Jesus was abandoned precisely so that we might not ever be. Now we can draw near to him in full assurance of faith (Heb 10:22), because Jesus has purified us of sin. Put your faith in Jesus, and then trust in God's promises. He will not abandon you.

In every one of these Bible stories of humiliation followed by exaltation we can see the Gospel at work. Not that the Gospel will always make us rich and powerful in this life. This is especially not the case for Jesus. But whatever your situation, the Gospel is the means of God's rescue. It is through the Gospel that we are lifted up out of humiliation and despair and injustice, and the world is put to rights.

Let's be clear about what we are talking about here. When I talk about the Gospel, I am not

talking about some list of religious propositions. This is not the right answer on God's pop quiz given at the "Pearly Gates." What I'm talking about is Almighty God himself. Yes he is transcendent, omnipotent and far-off. But in and through his only Son, we also know God as Immanuel, God with us, God drawn near.

How do we lay hold of this Gospel? How can you and I make this our own? Listen to what St. Peter says: "Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time."

And so Joseph teaches us that when things go from bad to worse, we can remain faithful to God by keeping our eyes on him, by living into our God-given situation, and ultimately by looking to Jesus, whose death and resurrection assures us that our own suffering will not last forever.

It may feel like death right now, but I would rather be with Jesus in death, than be alone in life. Ps 23:4. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.

The Lord be with you. Amen.