

Message #8
Joseph

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DEALING WITH SUCCESS:
JOSEPH AND GETTING TO THE TOP
GENESIS 41

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

We are a society that loves success. We crave it. We honor it. We worship it. We measure it in terms of money, power, popularity, educational degrees, titles, and win-loss records.

Success is winning an Emmy or an Oscar or a Grammy. It is being invited to the White House for winning the Super Bowl or the World Series or the NCAA basketball championship. It is becoming the CEO of the company. It is winning the election. It is having a TV ministry or a radio program.

Skill and talent usually have a role in achieving success. But there is also an element of good fortune or connections or someone else's misfortune. Making it to the top may involve someone else's dropped pass or missed putt. It may mean parents who were able to afford expensive skating lessons or music lessons with the best teachers or who could send their kids to an elite university. Here in Nevada and Las Vegas it could mean pulling the lever or pushing the button on the right slot machine at the right time and hitting the jackpot.

Unfortunately this limited view of success often carries over into the evangelical church. At the Gospel Music Association awards years ago Amy Grant's manager argued that the goals of the ministry and business are "**exactly the same--- market share.**" For the vast majority of churches who will never grow beyond 150 people and their pastors who will never write a book or have a TV ministry, a dominant market share will forever be unattainable. For the average person in the pew who will never gain national attention for excellence in his or her career this brand of success is also beyond reach.

Fortunately God's criteria for success are different than those of our society. We have already seen from our study of Joseph that one criterion for success in God's eyes is faithfulness. Joseph broke free from his challenging family background and his daunting immediate circumstances and trusted God. He was faithful to God's revealed will. Occasionally the Lord allows this kind of faithfulness to come to light in this life so that even the world can see it.

That was the case with Joseph. He experienced success not only in the Lord's terms but also in the world's terms. He made it to the top. He gained popularity and power and money. Joseph's faithfulness was a key factor in why the Lord allowed him to experience this kind of success. But he also had to go through a very difficult divine training program. In the passage before us today we will find that there was another key

ingredient. This key ingredient is something which all of us need to learn if we are going to be successful in this life in God's eyes.

We have seen from our ongoing study of Joseph that this young man dealt with some hard things in life. He was sold by his brothers into slavery. In Egypt he worked for twelve or thirteen years as a slave and then as a prisoner. This was all part of God's training program for his intended role in the world. Pastor and author A. W. Tozer once observed, **"It is doubtful whether God can bless a man greatly until he has hurt him deeply."** Such was the case with Joseph.

Last time we saw that two high government officials were entrusted to Joseph's care in the prison. When the two officials had vivid dreams one night, Joseph correctly interpreted them, predicting that the chief cupbearer would be returned to office and that the chief baker would be hung. Joseph begged the cupbearer to intercede for him before Pharaoh. But as the story left off at the end of #40, we were told, **"Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him."**

I.

In vv. 1-13 of #41 we learn about JOSEPH'S PROVIDENTIAL OPPORTUNITY. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. JOSEPH'S PROVIDENTIAL OPPORTUNITY) According to v. 1 Joseph spent two more years in jail after the dream incident with the two Egyptian officials. I wonder if Joseph feared that God had forgotten him. His prayers for freedom seemingly went unanswered. The reality was that God was alive and active and setting the stage for his release. Joseph was in the very center of God's plan for his life, right there in that lousy, stinking Egyptian prison.

At the end of those two years Pharaoh had a dream. Conservative Bible scholars following a literal interpretation of the Biblical chronology and matching it up with the lists of Egyptian kings suggest that the year of this dream was about 1884 BC. The pharaoh at that time was Sesostri II. (SESOSTRI II) Egyptian history tells us that Sesostri was known to use many Asiatic slaves as well as hired workers. He undertook a number of land and reclamation projects along the Nile River. Apparently he had his own Bureau of Reclamation.

There is evidence that this Egyptian king was involved in building a canal to connect an oasis near the Nile River with the river itself. (BAHR YUSEF) This is a picture of that canal, which exists today. As far back into history as the records go, it is known as Bahr Yusef, which means "The River of Joseph." Perhaps our Joseph was involved in this project.

Sesostri II, if indeed this is the right pharaoh, had a dream in which he saw seven fat cows coming up out of the Nile River. The Nile River was the most important physical resource in Egypt. It was to the Egyptians something like what the Colorado River is to us. But their economy was even more dependent upon it. This river meant not only water for their arid climate. It meant fish for food. Its annual spring floods meant the deposit of fertile soil near its banks which was essential to agricultural success.

As we saw last week, the Egyptians were very much into dream analysis, and they had a whole class of professional dream interpreters who believed that dreams, properly analyzed, could reveal to people what their futures had in store. (DREAM PAPYRUS) Archaeologists discovered this ancient dream manual written in Greek, but believed to be a translation of an earlier manual from Egypt probably written in hieroglyphics. Each page has a column which reads, **“If a man should see himself in a dream...”** Opposite this introductory statement appear a series of possible dreams. Comments follow these listed possible dreams with a description of good or bad and probable meanings of the dream.

For some reason the wise men could not interpret this dream which Pharaoh had. Perhaps this two-part dream did not fit into any of their categories of analysis. It is noteworthy that these dream analysts had enough integrity not to try to snooker the king with an interpretation that they themselves did not believe. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In the next few verses the divine reason for the prison experience of the chief cupbearer becomes clear. He becomes the link to bring Pharaoh and Joseph together. He hears about the king's dream and the inability of the professional dream analysts to interpret it. He remembers his own experience with Joseph in prison, and he brings the young man to Pharaoh's attention.

In the midst of Joseph's unfortunate circumstances in prison, God was at work. He was laying the foundation for a turnaround of events. He had not forgotten Joseph. He was preparing the young man for service, and He was laying the ground work for his rise to power.

The lesson for us is that we need to trust in God's providential care for His children. If indeed we have trusted in Jesus Christ as our personal Savior and are seeking to follow Him, we can be confident that He is at work. In the midst of the trials of life it may appear that He is absent or inactive. But God is faithful. He is accomplishing His purposes, and He will not abandon us.

In the aftermath of the Watergate scandal Charles Colson (PROJECTOR ON--- CHARLES COLSON) did some soul searching. Through the influence of a Christian friend, he decided to become a born again Christian. He put his trust in Jesus Christ. As a criminal case was developed against him, I don't know exactly how he prayed. But I suspect that Colson hoped for some escape from a prison sentence. There was no relief, however, granted by the prosecutors or the court. Colson was guilty of breaking federal law, and he went to jail.

Those were not happy times for him. But Charles Colson was right in the center of God's plan for his life. The Lord was taking care of him. He was preparing him for further service. When he did get out of prison, he took up an interest in prison ministry. Today most of you have heard about the work of Prison Fellowship. What seemed like a

bad thing turned out to be preparation for service to the Lord. It was a providential opportunity that gained national recognition.

II.

In vv. 14-36 we learn about JOSEPH'S PROVIDENTIAL INTERPRETATION OF PHARAOH'S DREAM. (II. JOSEPH'S PROVIDENTIAL INTERPRETATION...) The Egyptian ruler sends for this young Hebrew interpreter of dreams. Verse 14 says that Joseph changed his clothes and shaved. Tomb paintings from this era show that Egyptian officials were always clean shaven. Foreigners were depicted as wearing beards.

According to v. 15, **“And Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘I have had a dream, and there is no one who can interpret it. I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it.’”** Here is Joseph's big chance. He has suffered in prison for a number of years because of the false charge of the wife of the captain of the bodyguard. Before that he was a slave because his brothers had rejected him and sold him to passing traders. He had helped out two key Egyptian officials by correctly interpreting their dreams. He had been faithful to carry out all of his responsibilities. But it had led to little or no recognition. Now was the chance of a lifetime to get vindication, to receive some well-deserved respect. Now was the time to declare, “Yes, Your Majesty, I have what you need.”

But that is not quite what happened. Instead Joseph answered, **“It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer.”** “Your Majesty, you do not have that quite right. I have no such ability in myself. But My God will provide the answer to your question.”

This, I believe, is the most significant statement in the entire chapter. Part of its significance lies in the fact that Joseph was addressing one who was worshipped as a god in Egypt. The pharaohs in most of Egyptian history were regarded as descendants of the gods and gods themselves. But now Joseph, this foreigner, this convict from Canaan, has the nerve to tell Pharaoh that his God can provide the interpretation for the Egyptian ruler's dream.

Fortunately, providentially, this ruler appears to be a man of some integrity. He also desperately wants to know the meaning of his dream. So the king proceeds to describe it. The only significant difference in his description of the dream from the account that we have at the beginning of the chapter is the stress that Pharaoh places on the gauntness and ugliness of the second set of cows.

Joseph then proceeds to interpret Pharaoh's dream. Notice in v. 25 that Joseph says, **“God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do.”** In v. 28 he says, **“God has shown to Pharaoh what he is about to do.”** The interpretation of the dream is quite simple. Egypt is going to experience seven years of abundance and then seven years of famine. The repetition of the dream in two forms means that God is indeed going to

bring this to pass, and the fulfillment of it will begin shortly. It is Joseph's God, not the Egyptian gods, who is going to cause it to happen.

The Nile River is the longest river in the world. (NILE RIVER) It has many sources of water deep in Africa. So it is seldom affected to any great extent by drought. It is to this pharaoh's credit then that he believed Joseph.

Droughts, though very rare, were not unknown to affect the Nile River. There is an ancient Egyptian text that claims to describe a drought that happened a thousand years before the time of Joseph. Perhaps the current pharaoh knew of that text and of that earlier drought. The text gives us a flavor of what a seven year drought might have meant to the Egyptians

The pharaoh of this earlier drought writes, **"I was in distress on the Great Throne, and those who are in the palace were in heart's affliction from a very great evil, since the Nile had not come in my time for a space of seven years. Grain was scant, fruits were dried up, and everything which they eat was short. Every man robbed his companion. They moved without going (ahead). The infant was wailing; the youth was waiting; the heart of the old men was in sorrow, their legs were bent, crouching on the ground, their arms were folded. The courtiers were in need. The temples were shut up; the sanctuaries held [nothing but] air. Every[thing] was found empty."** (Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East*, Vol. 1; p. 25)

Joseph not only provided an accurate interpretation about the meaning of the current pharaoh's feast and famine dream, but he also provided a wise suggestion as to how Pharaoh should respond to it. He suggested that an overseer should be appointed to collect a 20% tax in the years of abundance. The grain for that should be stored away for the years of famine.

The important thing for us to notice is that Joseph gave credit where credit was due. He pointed pharaoh to the providential action of God. Joseph had the chance to claim credit for himself, but he gave the glory to God. In doing that he revealed the depth of his own spiritual maturity. You see, God is looking for people who will not only be faithful to Him but who will also give credit to Him.

A few weeks ago we considered the story of Bob Vernon, the former assistant police chief of Los Angeles. In his advance through the ranks of the department he said that there were many occasions when he was at the right place at the right time, when he happened to stumble across clues that solved crimes and when he had crooks who seemed to just come across his path. His testimony was that it was the Lord who did it.

I had a friend once who was something of an inventor. He made a living by repairing electronic equipment. He told me that he would frequently encounter problems that he seemed unable to figure out. In those situations he would pray and ask God for help. More often than not an idea would spring into his mind that would lead to a solution to his problem.

Often when I know that I have a good sermon, the illustrations and the outline just seem to flow into my mind. I have a high confidence in those situations that it is coming from above.

Jesus began His model prayer with the words, "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name." Our Lord's model prayer begins with a stated desire that God's name be made holy. We want Him to be recognized for who He is. We want Him to get the credit which He rightfully deserves.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism, which is used in many Presbyterian churches, poses this question: "**What is the chief end of man?**" The prescribed response is "**To glorify God and enjoy Him forever.**" I doubt whether there is a better answer to the question about our purpose in life. We are to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. We are to give Him the credit that is due to Him.

That giving of credit should happen not just in the quietness of our hearts but also in our speech. It should be reflected in how we use our time and in what we do with our money. We need to give credit where credit is due.

In Joseph's situation of opportunity before one of the most powerful men in the world he resisted the temptation to focus on his own abilities, to make himself the center of attention. Instead he glorified God. He testified before the most powerful man on the earth that it was the God of Israel who had the solution to his problem.

III.

In vv. 37-45 we come to JOSEPH'S PROVIDENTIAL RISE TO POWER. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. JOSEPH'S PROVIDENTIAL RISE TO POWER) The Egyptian ruler and his advisors believe Joseph's interpretation. They also like his suggested plan of action. So in v. 38 Pharaoh asks, "**Can we find a man like this, in whom is the Spirit of God?**" That is a significant admission, coming from one who was worshipped as a god. But it was obvious to these important men that Joseph had something that they didn't. And they wanted to use him for the benefit of their country.

Thus in v. 40 Joseph is put over Pharaoh's house. Potiphar had put Joseph over his house. The jailer had put Joseph over his house. Now Pharaoh has Joseph put over his house. More than that, Joseph is put in charge of the whole country. He becomes the Egyptian prime minister. In keeping with that important position Joseph is given dictatorial powers. He is given religious and social prestige. The name that Pharaoh gives to him means, "God speaks, He lives." It was perhaps the king's best attempt at showing that he believed, and that he wanted others to believe, that Joseph had a God who helped him.

Joseph was also given the daughter of the priest of On for a wife. On was the center of worship of Re, the sun god and chief god of the Egyptians. So the priest of On was the most important religious figure in the nation, except for Pharaoh, and Joseph was

marrying his daughter. The exact translation of her Egyptian name is “She belongs to you.”

Joseph has arrived. He is a success. He is thirty years old and the number two man in the most powerful country in the world. He was hot stuff. He was the recipient of God’s blessing. He had received God’s blessing largely because he had learned not only to trust God but also to give God credit for his successes and his accomplishments in life.

We will also enjoy God’s providential blessings when we learn to give Him credit when and where credit is due. That blessing may take a material form. It may not. That blessing may come in this life. It may not be received until the life to come. But we will be rewarded for our faithfulness and for our effort to give Him the credit.

IV.

Finally, in vv. 46-57 we learn about JOSEPH’S RESPONSE TO PROVIDENTIAL SUCCESS. (IV. JOSEPH’S RESPONSE TO...) Joseph has a rags to riches story. At only thirty years of age he has gone from the prison to the palace. He is a success not only in God’s eyes but also in the eyes of the world. But how will he handle it? Missionary leader and author J. Oswald Sanders writes, **“Not every man can carry a full cup. Sudden elevation frequently leads to pride and a fall. The most exacting test of all to survive is prosperity.”**

How does Joseph respond to success and prosperity? In vv. 47-49 we see that Joseph does well professionally. He follows his suggested economic plan. He stores up much food in the first seven years of prosperity.

Joseph also does well spiritually. Verse 50 informs us that before the period of famine begins, he has two sons. He names them Manasseh and Ephraim. They are Hebrew names, and the meaning of their names tells us something about Joseph’s spiritual condition. “Manasseh” means “meaning to forget.” Joseph explains his reason for this name, saying, **“For God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father’s house.”** “Ephraim” means “fruitfulness.” Joseph says that the significance here is that **“God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction.”** Joseph is still giving God credit for his success.

The years of famine follow the years of plenty, just as Joseph predicted. Joseph’s predictions and the preparations that he made for the famine must have improved his status and reputation in Egypt even more. At the end of the chapter we are told that the famine extended over all the face of the earth, which, in their frame of reference, included at least all of the middle eastern region. We are left with the final note that people from all over came to buy grain from Joseph.

The Lord has brought this severe famine upon all of these nations for the purpose of bringing one little clan to Egypt where it will be able to grow into a distinct nation that will eventually have a tremendous impact upon the world. Thus today what is going on in Israel is still front and center on the stage of world news.

When the family of Jacob arrives in Egypt, they will find one of their own members positioned high in government who will be able to see that they are well situated and protected. They will find a young man who has endured suffering and developed spiritually to the point that he is able to handle success.

The men and women in the Bible who best handled success were those who had taken advanced courses in humility in the school of hard knocks. Here in Egypt Moses was later raised as a son of Pharaoh. He experienced the best education and training and benefits that life had to offer. But when he tried to help his countrymen, he was rejected. For the next forty years he wandered around in the wilderness as a shepherd. He was receiving an advanced course in humility. It was only when he was eighty years old that he became the leader of the Hebrew people.

Years later David lived as a fugitive, running from the often insane King Saul. Earlier he had been a shepherd, a younger son in a family of Judah of no particular significance. His training in humility likewise prepared him to become successful, to become the most famous king of Israel.

Henry Crowell (HENRY CROWELL 1) had a difficult time in his early years. His father died when he was only nine years old. As a teenager Crowell was stricken with tuberculosis. He was in poor health for many years. His doctors told him to go out west to find better air.

When he was living in the Dakotas, he fell in love with a young woman. But his fiancée's mother forced her to break off the relationship because she was convinced that Crowell's illness was terminal. Crowell had mixed success as a farmer. But gradually his health did improve. He moved back east to Ohio and bought a grain mill. Then the idea came into his mind that the oats that farmers were feeding to their animals had nutritional value for humans. If they could be marketed in the right way, there might be a business opportunity. So he formed a little company. Perhaps a few of you have heard of it. He called it--- the Quaker Oats Company. (HENRY CROWELL 2)

As you might guess, Henry Crowell became wealthy. But he was able to handle his success. For Crowell was a Christian man who had taken an advanced course in humility, and he had learned to give credit where credit is due. In the last forty years of his life he gave 65% of his money and much of his time to Christian causes.

One of those causes was Moody Bible Institute in Chicago. Among other things he helped to establish their radio station and radio network. At one point the school tried to name a building after him. Crowell responded, **"Years ago, I told the Lord that if He would allow me to make money for His service, I would keep my name out of it, so He could have the glory."** He refused to let them do it. Henry Crowell understood what life was about. He was a mature Christian. He would not give in to the temptation to bring credit and attention to himself.

It was only after his death that a wider circle of people at Moody became aware of the contributions that he had made to the school and other causes. They eventually named one of the buildings and the library after him. (PROJECTOR OFF)

A key to success with God is giving Him the credit for whatever accomplishments and positive contributions we are able to make in life. One form of giving the Lord the credit which He is due is thanksgiving.

Many of the blessings that we as Christians and as Americans enjoy can be traced back to the founders of our nation, most of whom gave credit to God for the things that they accomplished. When the Pilgrims landed in Massachusetts in the fall of 1620 elder William Bradford quoted the Geneva Bible and said, **“Let them, therefore, praise the Lord, because He is good and His mercies endure forever.”**

During the next year half of their numbers died from disease and malnutrition. They endured primitive living conditions. They faced hostile Indians. Yet that fall they invited the friendly Indians and joined together in a three day feast in which they celebrated God’s goodness and gave thanks to Him. This was the first American Thanksgiving. Despite all of the hardships William Bradford wrote in his *History of the Plymouth Plantation* that he believed that God was the guiding force behind his expedition.

Few of us have had to flee religious persecution. Few of us have had the experience of seeing half of our friends and relatives wiped out by premature death. Few of us have gone without food and endured primitive living conditions. If these early Christians were able to give sincere thanks from their hearts, how much more reason we Christians have to give credit where credit is due.

I would like to close this part of our service today by giving you an opportunity to give thanks to the Lord. I would ask that several of you lead out in brief prayers acknowledging what good things God has done for you and for us.