

Message #7
Joseph

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PREPARATION FOR SERVICE:
THE EXAMPLE OF JOSEPH
GENESIS 40

Years ago I was in Wisconsin visiting with family in the summer. My brother Rob was flying in from Connecticut to join us. I volunteered to pick him up at the regional airport about 60 miles away. I left in plenty of time to meet him at the airport. But as I got close to my destination, I encountered detour signs. I had general familiarity with the area, and I knew that the signs directing traffic down a freeway would take me a considerable distance away from the airport.

So I decided to rely upon my own sense of direction and my superior instincts. I headed in a more direct route toward where I knew the airport was located, looking for a way via residential streets to get there.

Unfortunately I encountered roads that were blocked. Then I got stuck on a one way road that sent me onto a freeway taking me even further from the airport. It was miles to the next exit, where I turned around and returned to the spot where I had first encountered the detour signs. Needless to say, I was late for my pickup.

Life is full of detours. James in the first chapter of his little epistle in the New Testament (PROJECTOR ON--- JAMES 1:2) tells us believers, **“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds...”** These trials, these detours of life, take various forms: family crises, health problems, financial difficulties, death, unemployment, setbacks at school, and strains in personal relationships. These trials may seem frustrating and pointless. The temptation when we encounter them is to ignore the directions in God’s Word and head off on our own, trusting in our own instincts and sense of direction.

We were reminded last week in our study of Joseph that God never abandons His people, even in the detours of life. He has promised to be with us. There is a purpose to the detours of life that He puts in our way. The rest of the advice (JAMES 1:2-4) from James reads, **“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”**

The Lord is more concerned about our character development than our accomplishments. To get us to the place where we can be of greatest usefulness to Him, He seeks to develop that character. To do that He often uses what may appear to us to be detours. Such appeared to be the case with Joseph.

We have seen thus far from our study of Joseph that God had a plan for this young man. This plan included making Joseph prime minister of the country of Egypt, the most powerful nation in the world at that time. God also had a plan for Joseph's extended family. He planned to make of it a great nation, a nation through which the other nations of the world would be blessed.

But Joseph's brothers and parents were in danger of being absorbed by the pagan Canaanite culture in which they lived. God's plan was to use Joseph to get his family out of Canaan to Egypt where it could grow into a distinct nation. Toward that end the plan of God included the selling of Joseph by his brothers as a slave. It included the service of Joseph in the household of Potiphar, the captain of the bodyguard of Pharaoh. It included the wrongful imprisonment of Joseph in an Egyptian dungeon. It also included the events that we are going to examine this morning. Let's look at the purposes that God's detours in Joseph's life served and that God's detours in our lives often serve.

I.

First, in vv. 1-3 of Genesis #40 we are going to consider THE DEVELOPMENT OF HUMILITY. (I. THE DEVELOPMENT OF HUMILITY) We are reminded in these verses that Joseph was a prisoner in the jail in the house of Potiphar. He was there because Potiphar's wife had lodged a false sexual harassment charge against him.

In Psalm 105 vv. 17 & 18 we get a glimpse of the suffering which his slavery and imprisonment involved. (PSALM 105:17-18) We are told, "**[God] had sent a man ahead of them,/ Joseph, who was sold as a slave./ his feet were hurt with fetters;/ his neck was put in a collar of iron...**" Joseph had started out in Egypt as a slave. Now he was in an even more lowly position. Perhaps at the beginning of his imprisonment he was in chains.

At age 30 Joseph was going to be the number two official in all of Egypt. He would have dictatorial powers. He would have absolute authority over much of the government of the country. Such power would be the ruination of most thirty-year-olds. It would be very difficult to have that kind of authority and to maintain a proper attitude toward God, toward other people, and toward one's self. So it was essential for Joseph to get an advanced course in humility if he was going to be of significant service to the Lord.

It is essential for us also to learn humility if we want to be of significant service to the Lord. It is for this reason that He graciously sends many of us on detours where we experience rejection and loss and failure and embarrassment.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn (ALEXANDER SOLZHENITSYN) was the famous Russian dissident who spent time in Siberian prisons and who also became a writer. He won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1970. It was in his circumstances of humility where he found Christ. He wrote, "**In the intoxication of youthful successes I had felt myself to be infallible, and I was therefore cruel. In the surfeit of power I was a murderer, and an oppressor. In my most evil moments I was convinced that I was doing good,**

and I was well supplied with systematic arguments. And it was only when I lay there on rotting prison straw that I sensed within myself the first stirrings of good. Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, not between classes, nor between political parties either--- but right through every human heart--- and through all human hearts. ... So, bless you, prison, for having been in my life.” (A. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 3:5:5, p. 615) (PROJECTOR OFF)

In the first three verses of our story we learn that two officials in the Egyptian administration did something that angered the king. The job of the cupbearer to the king was to taste the food and sample the drinks that the king would consume. If anyone tried to poison the king, the cupbearer would suffer before the king could be harmed. Typically the cupbearer, especially the chief cupbearer, as this man was, served also as an advisor and confidant to the king. Later in the Old Testament we learn that Nehemiah had such a position before the Persian emperor.

The chief baker not only had responsibility for making food for the king, but also he provided food offerings to the pagan gods. He also left food in the tombs of important people in the kingdom who died. Ancient Egyptian texts from this era reveal that there were 57 varieties of bread and 38 varieties of cakes that bakers made. Probably this chief baker had a close working relationship with the chief cupbearer. The fact that the baker was later killed and the cupbearer was released suggests the possibility that the cupbearer was imprisoned with the baker at the beginning because of the close relationship between the two. Perhaps the Pharaoh needed some time to sort out where the responsibility for some offense rested in regard to the two of them.

These two men were sent to the same jail where Joseph was imprisoned. We are also told that this jail was in the house of Potiphar. Whether it was in the same building or merely in the same compound, the point is that both Joseph and the two officials were in the same place and under the ultimate supervision of Potiphar.

II.

In vv. 4-8 we come to THE DEVELOPMENT OF A SERVANT SPIRIT. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. THE DEVELOPMENT OF A SERVANT SPIRIT) Verse 4 begins with the statement: **“The captain of the guard appointed Joseph to be with them...”** Many commentators argue from this that the jailer mentioned at the end of #39 is Potiphar himself. That is possible. It seems more likely to me that the jailer mentioned in #39 is a separate individual and that the jailer’s boss, Potiphar, intervened at this point to make sure that these two prisoners were treated well. Potiphar knew Joseph’s abilities and his reliability, and he was confident that Joseph would do the best possible job of caring for these two officials.

The chief cupbearer and the chief baker were certainly known to Potiphar. They could have been his friends. The final disposition of their cases had not yet been determined. With the possibility that one or both might be returned to power, it was important to Potiphar that they both be given good care. To have one or both of these officials

returned to office being unhappy with the treatment that they had received in prison would not be good for the political fortunes of Potiphar. So Potiphar entrusted them to Joseph, and he took good care of them.

Joseph was thus involved in serving all kinds of people. He supervised and took care of bad people and individuals who were probably on the bottom of the economic scale there in the prison. Here he took care of people on the other end of the economic and political scale. This ultimately served a divine purpose. God was developing in Joseph a servant spirit that would be necessary for further service to the Lord.

These two officials one night each had vivid dreams that were similar yet different. The Egyptians were very much interested in the study and interpretation of dreams. They believed that dreams revealed information about the future. An ancient Egyptian book has been discovered by archaeologists which describes what were regarded as favorable and unfavorable dreams. There was a whole class of professional dream interpreters in Egypt.

What these two officials literally say at the beginning of v. 8 is: **“A dream we have dreamed, and an interpreter--- none.”** In their situation of imprisonment they aren't going to be able to call a professional dream interpreter to come by for a consultation. In this instance the two dreams were given by the true God and did contain true revelation about their futures.

This does not mean that the Egyptian dreams then, or our dreams now, normally contain true revelation concerning the future. The thing for which we are accountable to God is not trying to figure out what our dreams mean and if there is some message there for us from God. What we are accountable for is following His will as it has been revealed to us in the Bible.

The Lord, however, does accommodate Himself to human cultures at times to reveal something of Himself and His will in order to accomplish His purposes. We have seen that in recent years in the Middle East. There are many stories that Muslims are having dreams about Jesus. The Egyptians in the time of Joseph were really into dreams. So God chose to use a couple of dreams as a means of getting Joseph into the position in which He wanted him.

Centuries later God would use a medium to reveal to King Saul that he was going to be defeated and killed in battle against the Philistines on the following day. God's Word said that His people were not supposed to go to mediums to figure out the future. When God actually spoke through this medium, the message was one of judgment upon Saul, partly for his disobedience to God in seeking out this medium.

Centuries after that the Lord would even accommodate Himself to the beliefs of pagan astrologers in the east to get these wise men to come to Bethlehem and leave valuable gifts for Joseph and Mary and Jesus, which would sustain them when they were forced

to flee as refugees to Egypt. Thus the Lord may graciously choose to reveal His will at times through methods that are regarded in particular cultures as being ways to know the future. But the clear responsibility of believers is not to become fixated on knowing the future through astrology or seances or the study of dreams or any method other than our study of the Bible.

The morning after these two officials had their dreams, Joseph saw that they were upset. He was sensitive to their need. He was developing a true servant spirit. Because he was sensitive and was able to get them to talk, he was able to be of further service to them.

Joseph had learned about service from being a slave in the household of Potiphar. Now he was learning more about service from working in the prison of Potiphar. He was having experience in serving what some regarded as the scum of society and the cream of society. One day Joseph was going to be involved in serving the people of the entire country of Egypt. All of these experiences were part of his valuable training program that would equip him to serve in this future capacity. But Joseph was able to carry on in this lowly environment only because he was convinced that he was also serving God.

As I look back at my own life, I am thankful for some of the experiences which I have had, some of which seemed, at the time, to be detours. Early on I had the experience of working at a couple of union manufacturing plants. I worked at a computer company for a year. I worked as a house painter. I worked on a tree farm. In my last church we had a smaller congregation. At one point I did a side job of taking care of a retired Jewish veterinarian several nights a week. He had suffered a stroke, and the family wanted someone to be with him during the night. For a long time he would just get mad at me for being around and would try to convince me to leave. If I helped him more than he wanted to be helped, he would at times fly into a rage and curse me up one side and down the other.

I would not of my own volition have chosen to be in a situation where I needed to take a second job. But sometimes the Lord sends us on these trips that appear to us to be detours. Sometimes on these detours He is teaching us things about serving people. What we need to keep in mind when these detours of life don't make a lot of sense is that the ultimate master whom we serve is the Lord.

The story is told about a talented young concert pianist who was performing at the first concert of his professional career. As he played through his program, his audience seemed spell bound by his performance. At the end of the program the crowd erupted into a standing ovation. All were up on their feet except for one old man in the front row. Yet the young pianist walked off the stage with a downcast look on his face.

Backstage the young man's manager came up to him and piled on the praise. But the young man responded, "**It was no good; it was a failure.**" His manager responded, "**You didn't fail! It was tremendous! Look out there; everyone is clapping.**"

Everyone is on their feet, except that one old man.” And the young pianist responded, **“Yes, but that one old man is my teacher.”**

Many who hold positions of Christian leadership have learned who their teacher and master is. Through the detours of life they have learned the true meaning of service--- service to other people and service to God. But some have not. The focus of their attention has consciously or unconsciously become the applause of the audience and adoration of the crowd. The result has been too many high profile scandals in the evangelical world where prominent leaders have listened to the wild applause of people but have failed to notice that the Lord was remaining seated in the front row. The challenge for us is to keep our eyes fixed on the Teacher.

III.

Verses 8-22 I have categorized under the heading of THE DEVELOPMENT OF CONFIDENCE IN GOD. (III. THE DEVELOPMENT OF CONFIDENCE IN GOD) In the second part of v. 8 Joseph says to the two officials who just had the dreams, **“Do not interpretations belong to God? Please tell them to me.”**

This shows us something significant about the spiritual status of Joseph. He is convinced about God’s power to providentially provide dreams and to provide interpretations of them. Notice that Joseph believes that the power to interpret dreams lies not in any interpreter but in God Himself. But Joseph also has confidence in his ability to receive an understanding of the dreams from the Lord.

Verse 8 also indicates that Joseph still has confidence in the meaning of the dream which he had received years ago in Canaan. It was clear to him and to his brothers that the meaning of that dream was that his brothers and his parents would eventually bow down before him. The chances for the fulfillment of that promise did not look so hot at the moment. But by this expression of faith that Joseph could interpret the dreams of the Egyptian officials we have an indication that he still believed that God was going to fulfill the promise given to him in his own unique dream.

Joseph was making a bold assertion about the power of his God to these worshippers of Egyptian gods. But the cupbearer was willing to hear Joseph out, and he proceeded to describe his dream. Whether Joseph took some time to think about the dream and pray about it, we don’t know. The text gives us the impression that it didn’t take very long for Joseph to give the true meaning of it. According to Joseph’s interpretation the dream meant that the cupbearer was going to be restored to his office in three more days.

Some of Joseph’s frustration and unhappiness comes out in his added request to the cupbearer that he intercede for him to Pharaoh when he gets out of prison. But Joseph’s pleadings to the cupbearer would be forgotten, at least for a while. It would be more of the miraculous working of God that would cause Joseph to be released from the slammer.

When the baker heard the favorable interpretation for the cupbearer, he then eagerly described his own dream. Perhaps he had wanted the cupbearer to go first because he knew that he was truly guilty of a more serious offense against Pharaoh. Joseph's interpretation of the second dream, however, is not favorable. He predicts a hanging for the baker in three days.

Three days later events come to pass just as Joseph predicted them. That fulfillment must have been a source of encouragement to Joseph. It was evidence that God was still with him. It was a reaffirmation of the truth of his own dream. It was also a confidence builder that would prepare Joseph for the interpretation of the Pharaoh's dream that would launch him into a position of power.

Detours of life that bring people to prison are never pleasant. But when you look at prison experiences in the Scriptures and in the rest of human history, you find that often they are occasions when people develop confidence in God.

I had a classmate in seminary who was an Air Force pilot in the Vietnam War. He was shot down on one of his missions over the north, and--- if I remember right--- he spent six years in North Vietnamese prisons. It was a difficult experience. But it was also a transforming experience. He recognized it as a detour with a purpose. (JERRY SINGLETON) Jerry Singleton came out of prison having developed a deep confidence in the God of the Bible. He determined to go to seminary to be better equipped to communicate his knowledge of the God who is there. When he graduated, he returned to the Air Force as a chaplain. If you would like to learn more about his experience, you can check out my Point to Ponder podcast this week.

We may not have had an experience of being in prison. But one or more of our detours in life may have been a time of intense suffering or a kind of wilderness experience. Perhaps there are some of you here right now who feel like you are stuck on a detour, and the experience right now may be tough, and it may not make a lot of sense. The issue is how we will respond in the face of the challenge. Will we choose to become bitter and filled with self-pity, or will we, like Joseph, grow in our confidence in the Lord?

IV.

Finally in v. 23 we come to the subject of THE DEVELOPMENT OF PATIENCE. (IV. THE DEVELOPMENT OF PATIENCE) The text tells us, **“Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him.”** The cupbearer was restored to his high position in government, but he forgot about Joseph. In v. 1 of the next chapter we find out that two more years went by before there was a break in his case. Two more years in that stinking, rotten dungeon. Clearly the cupbearer forgot about him, but what about God? Has He forgotten Joseph?

In v. 46 of #41 we are told that Joseph was thirty years old when he became prime minister of Egypt. At the beginning of #37 we are told that Joseph was seventeen when he gave a bad report about his brothers. The selling of Joseph into slavery seems to

have come shortly after that. So Joseph spent about twelve years of his life as a slave and as a prisoner. At certain times that may have seemed like wasted time to Joseph. At certain times it may have seemed like he was on a pointless detour. I wonder if there were moments when he experienced bitterness and frustration.

From God's perspective this was training time. This was a scheduled detour in the program of God for Joseph. The Lord was at work in developing the character of His choice servant. He was at work in developing his servant spirit and his patience.

It was this quality of patience that Joseph would one day need as prime minister of Egypt as he dealt with people who could not understand the purpose for a massive building program to store huge amounts of grain when they were in the midst of a time of plenty. It was patience that Joseph would need in helping the Egyptians endure an extended period of drought and famine that would eventually come. It was patience that Joseph would need in bringing reconciliation to his own family.

In the midst of a society which is trained by TV programs and Tik Tok videos to find solutions and answers to the problems of life in a few minutes, the servants of God also need to develop the quality of patience. In the midst of a culture which has produced more and more broken families with individuals who suffer significant psychological scars, we need to cultivate the quality of patience.

A couple of years ago a historian by the name of Alan Kreider wrote a book entitled *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*. In his opinion the key to the successful growth of the early church was not so much evangelism, public preaching, or other missionary activities, as important as they were. It was patience.

Patience in the ancient world was a trait associated with subordinates like slaves and victims. People at the top were not expected to be patient. Early church leaders emphasized patience in their stress on devotion to Christian teaching and habits of worship. They promoted a strict moral code and wanted evidence of spiritual maturity before Christians were promoted to positions of leadership.

This patient approach to life was reflected in care for spouses and love for children when much of society treated family members as little more than household slaves. When the plague struck, Christians ran toward sick people, while others ran away. Many Romans killed babies that they did not want. Christians did not do that. They even adopted children left to die.

The early church understood that long-lasting change requires long-lasting effort. It requires an understanding that the fruit of our labors may not be realized until we are gone from this planet. Christian patience recognizes the priority of faithfulness over outward success.

The lesson from the story of Joseph is that God has a place of service for each one of us--- if we have indeed trusted in Jesus Christ as our Savior. It may not be until later in

life that we are useful to the Lord. Abraham was 80 before God really put him to work. Moses was 80 when God told him to bring his people out of Egypt.

The place of service may not have a fancy title. Maybe your real significance will be as a parent or grandparent. But your role has eternal significance in the plan of God. That plan will probably mean detours in the route to the position of service, as was the case with Joseph and Abraham and Moses.

The question is: When we encounter those divinely appointed detours, will we go off on our own on the path which makes sense to us? Or will we heed the signs that God has graciously provided for us in His Word? Will we believe that there is a purpose for these detours and that they are indeed a part of God's plan for our lives?