

Potiphar's Wife

Genesis 39:1-23

We read of a wealthy man this morning, one who had great prosperity.

v.2. "The LORD was with Joseph, and he was a successful man; and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian."

But what really is prosperity? Is it money? Things. Expensive things. Comfort. Luxury. Those are all good questions to ask. But what is true wealth? That Hebrew word for successful can also be translated as "prosperous."

v.3 "And his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD made all he did to prosper in his hand."

Same word. And that's not a bad translation, but it raises the same questions. What is success? How do you measure it? How is it related to prosperity? Let me give you a sense of what the Hebrew word means, a simple explanation of,

I. THE NATURE OF TRUE PROSPERITY.

The nature of true success. Listen carefully--prosperity is the ability to accomplish your goals.

Prosperity doesn't mean health and wealth, the easy life promised by the American dream. Instead, the root meaning of true prosperity is the ability to accomplish what what you set out to accomplish. Now, some people set out to accomplish very worldly goals, such as material wealth. And they measure their prosperity according to that worldly standard. But God defines the goals which we should set out to accomplish. Spiritual goals. How about holiness.

1Pet. 1:13 "Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to

you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; 14 as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance; 15 but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, 16 because it is written, "Be holy, for I am holy."

Or godliness.

1Tim. 6:11 "But you, O man of God, flee these things and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness. 12 Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, to which you were also called and have confessed the good confession in the presence of many witnesses."

Right at the outset today, you must understand the nature of true prosperity, for we see that prosperity in the life of Joseph. And I do not want you to think for a second that I am measuring Joseph's prosperity by his outward success, for this text is perhaps the greatest example in the Bible of true godly success being demonstrated by external prosperity. But the lesson of this passage is not that God will make your life easy and give you the position which he gave to Joseph. Rather, the lesson is focused upon the nature of true godliness which resists the temptations of sin and is rewarded by true prosperity.

This chapter is very refreshing, especially after last week's text, because here things are the way they ought to be. The good guys do what is good, the bad guys do what is bad, and the good guys win. To say that with a little more sophistication, the man of God demonstrates true godliness, resisting true temptation, and experiences true prosperity. Notice where the description of that prosperity starts, with God's presence.

A. Prosperity comes when the Lord is with us.

v.1-3

The Lord was with him. That's all that you need to know about Joseph. That's all that you need to know about the root of true prosperity. God is with you.

Consider Joshua. He was promised prosperity in the conquest of the promised land. And in that promise, he was exhorted to be strong and courageous.

Josh. 1:6 "Be strong and of good courage, for to this people you shall divide as an inheritance the land which I swore to their fathers to give them. 7 Only be strong and very courageous, that you may observe to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may prosper wherever you go. 8 This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. [Then notice this great promise.] For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success. 9 Have I not commanded you? Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go."

There it is. The source of prosperity and success. The Lord your God will be with you wherever you go. Just as he promised.

Josh.1:1 "After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, it came to pass that the LORD spoke to Joshua the son of Nun, Moses' assistant, saying: 2 "Moses My servant is dead. Now therefore, arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people, to the land which I am giving to them—the children of Israel. 3 Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given you, as I said to Moses. 4 From the wilderness and this Lebanon as far as the great river, the River Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, and to the Great Sea toward the going down of the sun, shall be your territory. 5 No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life; as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will

not leave you nor forsake you."

And how do you know if the Lord is with you? Well, he has given us his promise.

Heb.13:5 "...For He Himself has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." 6 So we may boldly say: "The LORD is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?"

Therefore, with that promise of God's presence with us, we read in,

Ps. 1:1 "Blessed is the man Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, Nor stands in the path of sinners, Nor sits in the seat of the scornful; 2 But his delight is in the law of the LORD, And in His law he meditates day and night. 3 He shall be like a tree Planted by the rivers of water, That brings forth its fruit in its season, Whose leaf also shall not wither; And whatever he does shall prosper."

Now, I've already taken you to a lot of verses this morning, and I do so to define the nature of Joseph's prosperity--his ability to achieve the goal of godliness. Godly obedience. That prosperity came to him first of all, because God was with him. And you won't find prosperity any other way. With that understanding, look at just how much,

B. Prosperity alters all the circumstances of life.

v.4-6

Because Joseph's eyes were set upon the Lord, because he sought the Lord in all things, he was prosperous in all that he did. He had been sold by his brothers to the Midianites as a slave. They sold him to Potiphar, "an Egyptian who was one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard." He lived in Potiphar's home. The Lord gave him success in everything he

did, and so we read that,
v.4-6

God took a man in prison and exalted him. That's that theme of the Messiah I mentioned a couple weeks ago, the pattern of Joseph's life that was copied though much more fully in the life of Jesus Christ. Prosperity changes everything.

Now, don't hear me say that if you are godly, then whenever you find yourself in difficult circumstances, God will get you out. But I will say this, that God transforms every circumstance you are in, so that his promise will always remain true,

Rom. 8:28 "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose."

He might give you wealth and honor. He might leave you in prison. But if godliness and holiness are your goals, then by God's grace, you will accomplish your goals. You will be prosperous and successful. Even if you achieve those goals in the lowliness and humility of worldly poverty.

Matt. 5:6 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."

Yet for Joseph, evidently cleansed of his youthful pride, prosperity meant great honor. Prosperity, true prosperity, alters all the circumstances of life. Joseph's prosperity was threatened however. His spiritual success and the fullness of his blessings from God were threatened. Threatened by temptation. A very familiar temptation. The lust of the flesh.

v.6b-7

What we see in those verses is,

II. THE NATURE OF TRUE TEMPTATION.

It was a temptation that no doubt went to the depth of Joseph's heart, for he had lived among immorality. He was familiar with sexual sin in the lives of his brothers and his father. And he was certainly familiar with it in the world around him, the world of the Canaanites and the world of Egypt.

Joseph was a man, which meant that he had physical desires. He was given the opportunity to fulfill some of those desires, but the invitation came in a way which was, without question, sinful. And so the real temptation was not merely physical, but spiritual. It was a temptation of the heart. Would he obey God, and resist the temptation? Or would he disobey God, in order to fulfill his physical desires. That really is the nature of true temptation.

A. The heart is tempted by the physical desires of the flesh.

You see, the body doesn't sin. The heart does. The flesh doesn't sin. The soul does. And the body isn't tempted. The spirit is. Sin is born of our own evil desire, the desire of our heart. So we read in,

James 1:13 "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. 14 But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. 15 Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death."

We don't know how close Joseph might have come to falling to this temptation, but we know with absolute certainty that he didn't fall. Strongly stated, he refused.

v.8a "But he refused."

And in his refusal, in his rejection of this immoral proposition,

Joseph shows us that,

B. The heart can resist temptation by looking beyond the physical desires of the flesh.

Now, if he had failed to look beyond those desires, he would have accepted the invitation. And what an appealing invitation it was. A woman who wanted him. Obviously, it would seem that Joseph was not sexually active, to use the language of our day. He wasn't married. There weren't any women in his life. There are no indications that he wasn't still a virgin. But he was well-built and handsome.

So how did he resist the lust of the flesh? He looked deeper, and had three solid grounds for turning away this seductive woman. First, his position. He was trusted. His master had bestowed unlimited confidence upon him. Joseph could not betray such a deep trust.

v.8

You know, an ungodly man would use that situation as an excuse to go ahead and sin, for his master's trust meant that he would not get caught. Because he was trusted, he could get away with it. And for many of us, such confidence of not getting caught might well reduce or remove our resistance to sin. I can say honestly, though sadly, of my own heart, the constraint of not wanting to get caught does keep me from sin. And I'm thankful that it does, but I grieve for the absence of higher motives. And the fearful realization is, what if that restraint were removed?

For Joseph, it was removed. Because he was trusted, he could get away with it. But Joseph had higher goals than physical pleasure. Like proving himself faithful of trust. The godly virtue of being trustworthy. That was more important than the fleeting pleasure of a sexual encounter. It took a long time to build his

reputation for being trustworthy. It would only take a single moment to destroy it. So he resisted temptation by focusing upon his duty and the privileges of the trust that had been given him. He would not betray a man who trusted him!

Joseph had a second reason for rejecting this offer. He understood that this woman was off limits to him. She was married. She was Potiphar's wife.

v.9a

And the third reason he gives, really the highest and greatest reason he could possibly give, was that what she suggested was a wicked thing. Joseph understood the nature of sin.

v.9b "How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?"

What a great question to be asking yourself, when you are tempted to sin! Joseph calls sin sin. He calls this wicked thing, a wicked thing. And he knows that it would be a sin against God! Sure, it would be an offense against Potiphar. Though he probably would never know. Sure it would be an offense against Potiphar's wife, for he would be the occasion of her committing adultery. And sure it would be a sin against his own body, which was the temple of the Holy Spirit. But more than that, it was wicked and sinful in the eyes of the Lord. That realization is what restrained him from giving in to this temptation. He would not sin against God.

People of God, realize from this example that every sin is a sin against God. Every sin, however small or large, is a wicked thing, a great evil. An offense against God. Therefore, for that reason above all others, hate it. Ask God to give you a holy hatred of sin, particularly the sin that might lurk in the depths of your own heart.

Whatever the temptation, look beyond the physical desires of the flesh. That's what it means to be created in the image of God, for you have a conscience. You have the ability and the freedom to make moral choices. You are not an animal. You are not a wild beast. You are not a dog at the beck and call of physical desire, an animal who goes into heat and lives merely by instinct and desire. You are not merely an animal! In fact, the very measure of godliness is the ability to restrain physical desires, and to fulfill them only in the context of what God has declared to be right. In other words, self-control.

1Ths. 4:1 "Finally then, brethren, we urge and exhort in the Lord Jesus that you should abound more and more, just as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God; 2 for you know what commandments we gave you through the Lord Jesus. 3 For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality; 4 that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, 5 not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God; 6 that no one should take advantage of and defraud his brother in this matter, because the Lord is the avenger of all such, as we also forewarned you and testified. 7 For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness. 8 Therefore he who rejects this does not reject man, but God, who has also given us His Holy Spirit."

We are moral creatures, created in the image of God with the responsibility and ability to control our physical desires. And until we are held responsible for our behavior and for the moral choices we make, we will never learn the virtue of self-control.

Joseph demonstrates such self-control, for in the words of one of my commentaries, "this shameless hussy was not in the least impressed by any of the higher considerations that Joseph had sought to drive into her conscience." She repeated her invitations

day after day.

v.10

And one day, at the right moment, with no one else around, the temptation reached a climax.

v.11-12

She actually grabbed him. She grabbed his clothes as if to forcibly undress him. She may well have been undressing herself. This was a desperate, wicked act. And Joseph immediately senses the danger. He does the only thing a godly man could do under those conditions. He runs away! Fleeing temptation takes on a very literal meaning under these circumstances. And at this point, we see fully,

III. THE NATURE OF TRUE GODLINESS.

Joseph must have known he was in trouble. You know the expression about the fury of a woman scorned. This situation has gone past the point of no return. Joseph could well have expected what she might do next, and he should well have known what would happen to him. He was in big trouble.

And what does a godly man do when he faces the real possibility of such danger? He trusts in God, and remains faithful.

A. A godly man will remain faithful regardless of the consequences.

He faced untrue accusations, from a woman who now hated him, a woman humiliated by his rejection of her adulterous invitations.

v.13-15

She intentionally made Joseph look bad, screaming out as if he were attempting to rape her. She refers to him merely as this

“Hebrew,” clearly an ethnic slur against him. And she tells her master the same lie, only worse, blaming him for bringing Joseph into the house in the first place.

v.16-18

Potiphar responded in the only way possible, under the circumstances.

v.19-20

A couple things about that. First, the implication is that Potiphar didn't entirely believe his wife. He himself is described in verse one as one of Pharaoh's officials, and that word “official” really means eunuch. Now, it's possible that “eunuch” was just a title of an official, a general term not implying actual castration. But it is probably more likely that Potiphar was literally a eunuch, physically castrated and unable to be involved in the act of marriage. Leaders would demand such a requirement of their high officials to ensure loyalty and undivided service. Maybe we ought to think about it in our country!

In that case, you could humanly expect that Potiphar's wife would be frequently searching for adulterous opportunities, and perhaps she had that very reputation. If Potiphar had fully believed his wife, and fully believed that Joseph was guilty not only of adultery, but attempted rape, the punishment would have been far more severe. Death. As it was, he was simply put into prison. And that, the prison for political prisoners not the more hardened criminals.

But make no mistake about it, though he wasn't put to death, still this was a horrible experience, and it involved great pain and even torture, as we learn from,

Ps. 105:17 “He sent a man before them—Joseph—who was

sold as a slave. 18 They hurt his feet with fetters, He was laid in irons.”

Yet Joseph remained faithful. Apparently, he didn't even offer any defense. He didn't retaliate against Potiphar's wife for the horrible lies she spoke about him, nor did he demonstrate any anger or bitterness toward Potiphar. A godly man will remain faithful regardless of the consequences.

It's called perseverance. And if you wish to grow in godliness, if you wish to live a holy life in loving obedience to God's commands, then God must work in you the virtue of perseverance. It is a fruit of the spirit, listed in Galatians 5:22. And it is specifically identified as the fruit of suffering.

Rom. 5:3 “And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; 4 and perseverance, character; and character, hope. 5 Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.”

Also,

James 1:2 “My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. 4 But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.”

Joseph learned obedience through suffering, and he developed perseverance. And guess what? We end up right back where we started. This text ends in the same place that it begins. With a description of God's blessing upon Joseph, the blessing of true prosperity.

B. A godly man will experience the blessing of true prosperity.

Such integrity. “The keeper of the prison did not look into anything that was under Joseph’s authority.”

If you work for an immediate supervisor, that should be your approach to your own work, and that reputation should be your goal. Your supervisor knows that he doesn’t even have to check up on you. What you say you will do, you will do, and you will do well. Even more than that, the Lord gave Joseph success. Prosperity.

Now, if prosperity really means the ability to accomplish your goals, then I have to admit, there are many days that pass in which I feel anything but prosperous and successful. I don’t accomplish the goals of what I have wanted to get done. So I need to be careful to define my goals well, to redefine them as necessary. And when I do that well, I believe that I can say that Lord does give me prosperity. The greatest goal, in Jesus’ words, Mat.6:33 “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness.”

If you will, he promises that you, too will be prosperous and successful, for he says, “...all these things shall be added to you.”

Matt. 5:6 “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, For they shall be filled.”

Ps. 1:1 “Blessed is the man Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, Nor stands in the path of sinners, Nor sits in the seat of the scornful; 2 But his delight is in the law of the LORD, And in His law he meditates day and night. 3 He shall be like a tree Planted by the rivers of water, That brings forth its fruit in its season, Whose leaf also shall not wither; And whatever he does shall prosper.”

I’ll end with that famous challenge to Joshua, a challenge God would declare to each one of us.

Josh.1:7 “Only be strong and very courageous, that you may observe to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may prosper wherever you go. 8 This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success. 9 Have I not commanded you? Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.”