

Manasseh and Ephraim

Genesis 41:38-57

Perhaps never in history has a man moved so quickly from the lowest of places to the highest. Joseph had been in Egypt 13 years, sold into slavery and finally imprisoned. But in one brief encounter with Pharaoh, King of Egypt, Joseph went from being an unknown, alien prisoner to being the second in command, the man in all the Egypt who exercised and commanded the authority of Pharaoh himself. Amazing, isn't it?

At age thirty, Joseph was well prepared for this exaltation, for he had been well taught in the school of adversity and sorrow. In this regard, he illustrates exactly what Jesus experienced, for Jesus' birth, in a manger of all places, demonstrates the absolute lowliness with which he clothed himself. And though he never sinned, we read that Jesus, too, "learned obedience from what he suffered."

Joseph was no longer the proud and boastful young man who had so infuriated his brothers. He was now tempered and mellowed by the difficult circumstances of his life. He was, therefore, well prepared for what God was about to do in his life.

As a matter of personal encouragement, let me say as we begin, that God will often design difficult circumstances in your life for just that reason, and those who learn godliness through difficulty are those most prepared and equipped to remain faithful during times of great blessing and prosperity.

And so the example of Joseph, trained well in the school of life, gives us,

I. THE DEFINITION OF A GODLY MAN.

His godliness was apparent and obvious, open for all to see. As it must be, by definition. Godliness means a change of life, whereby you become more and more like Jesus Christ. Godliness shows. It comes out of every pore in your body, it comes out with every breath of air you breathe out. That's its nature.

Even Pharaoh saw it. Even the pagan, unbelieving, idolatrous King of Egypt saw that Joseph was a godly man.

v.37-38

Joseph had just described a plan for the nation of Egypt, based on Pharaoh's dreams.

Gen. 41:33 "Now therefore, let Pharaoh select a discerning and wise man, and set him over the land of Egypt. 34 Let Pharaoh do this, and let him appoint officers over the land, to collect one-fifth of the produce of the land of Egypt in the seven plentiful years. 35 And let them gather all the food of those good years that are coming, and store up grain under the authority of Pharaoh, and let them keep food in the cities. 36 Then that food shall be as a reserve for the land for the seven years of famine which shall be in the land of Egypt, that the land may not perish during the famine."

Well, Pharaoh lost no time in appointing that man, that discerning and wise man, for he immediately recognized that there was, in Joseph,

A. The presence of the spirit of God.

Don't miss this. The Egyptians were not believers. They didn't know the one true and living God, nor did they worship and serve him. But they still had enough spiritual discernment, by God's common grace, to be able to see that a supernatural element had been involved in this interpretation.

In this regard, they are more spiritually alert than the people of our own day. For in our culture at large, particularly within our government and scientific and higher educational institutions, the one absolute doctrine which cannot be challenged is that the supernatural doesn't exist. And even when people speak of things supernaturally, they are to remain private, personal beliefs far removed from public life.

That wasn't the case for Pharaoh. He recognized the presence of the spirit of God. He recognized supernatural power. And I submit to you that one obvious measure of godliness is when others recognize the presence of the spirit of God in you.

Now, theologically, biblically, I understand perfectly well that the spirit of God is present in all of you, all who proclaim the name of the Lord Jesus and are saved by grace through faith. For in it's most personal sense, the spirit of God is the Holy Spirit. Your body is, therefore, a temple of the Holy Spirit. He is in you as a deposit, guaranteeing your inheritance. I know that, and don't want to confuse you. But the issue is not, "IS the Holy Spirit in you?" He is.

The issue is, does it show? Do others see in you the presence of the Holy Spirit? Do they see in you the presence of God? The character of God? The love of God? The holiness of God? The goodness and faithfulness of God? We must not measure godliness merely by external things. I go to church, so I'm godly. I am faithful to my wife, so I'm godly. I read the Bible, so I'm godly. Those things are all well and good, but the measure of godliness must be even more than that outward presentation. There must be the evidence and manifestation of the presence of God in your life! And God's presence will show in your character. Your personality. It will be seen by others around you. Even unbelievers.

The definition of a godly man is the presence of the spirit of God, a presence that is obvious to others. That definition of godliness also includes,

B. The practice of discernment and wisdom.

Again, notice that these things really do refer to the attitude of the heart, not outward actions nor intellectual knowledge. Discernment and wisdom. That's what Pharaoh saw in Joseph. Beyond compare.

v.39

That's the goal of all biblical teaching. Not knowledge, not proper understanding of doctrine. Discernment and wisdom.

Now, you need knowledge and proper understanding of doctrine, for that is the basis for discernment and wisdom, but my point is that we must not be content with mere knowledge and proper understanding. The goal is discernment, not merely gathering facts together. Perceptive insight, understanding. Of life. Of everything about life. Of the circumstances of life. And wisdom, the ability to apply knowledge properly to all the daily affairs of life.

Some people have great knowledge, but very little discernment and wisdom. And some wise and discerning people actually have very little specific knowledge. It is they who are the more godly. And Joseph was known to have such a reputation. In God's providence, he was, therefore, exalted by Pharaoh to this most high position. And so we see,

II. THE EXALTATION OF A GODLY MAN.

It is in this exaltation that Joseph's character shines, for he responds with consistent and genuine humility, with the absence of all pride and self-exaltation.

Now, before I say another word, please don't think that I am giving you a prescription for obtaining power and riches. I am not saying, "Be godly like Joseph was, and you will be exalted, like Joseph was." If you go away thinking that today, then I've failed miserably in communicating the message of this passage.

Ultimately, it was God who exalted Joseph, not Pharaoh. And, as we've seen in previous chapters, Joseph's exaltation was to fulfill God's purposes. And we will see those purposes of God perfectly fulfilled in the remaining chapters of Genesis, and in the rest of the OT. For all of Joseph's family will come to Egypt, and God's purpose was for that family to be enslaved for 400 years and then to be delivered out of Egypt as the nation of Israel.

All of that would happen, of course. And humanly speaking, it happened because Joseph was a godly man whose godliness was recognized by an unbelieving King. Indeed,

A. Joseph was promoted to a position of great honor.

Look at how it is described.

v.40

Let me read that a bit more literally, with the forcefulness of the original words. Pharaoh says to Joseph, "According to your mouth, or on your mouth, all my people shall kiss." Or simply, "All people will kiss your mouth."

In that culture, the kiss was the symbol of subjection and honor, the sign of respect and homage offered to a superior. Pharaoh says, "According to your mouth, according to everything that you say, in accord with whatever you say, whatever order you give, the people will be compelled to submit." To do homage, again, literally, to kiss.

v.40b "Only in regard to the throne will I be greater than you."

He then specifies Joseph's authority.

v.41

And he gave Joseph the outward symbols of his own authority.

v.42

The signet ring was the ring which, in effect, allowed Joseph to sign official documents with the royal authority of Pharaoh. It represented Pharaoh's authority, as did the clothing of robes of linen and gold chain. And, of course, anyone with great authority should have proper transportation.

v.43

v.44

"Without your consent no man may lift his hand or foot in all the land of Egypt." In other words, Joseph had control over everything, every aspect of Egyptian life. All of it.

But he was still a foreigner, so Pharaoh even gave him the status of an Egyptian, giving him a new name--an Egyptian name, and an Egyptian wife.

v.45

As much as possible, therefore, Joseph is granted the status and privileges of Egyptian citizenship and social status. His Egyptian name probably means "God speaks and he lives." And while that is a true description of the true God, the name probably isn't meant by Pharaoh as a confession of true faith, just the polytheistic faith of the Egyptians.

Joseph's wife was the daughter of an Egyptian priest. Her name was Asenath. We know little else about her, but we do

know from the biblical record that Joseph was faithful to her, and that she was evidently a faithful wife and mother.

Now properly exalted in his official position and in the eyes of the people, Joseph begins his new job.

v.45b-46

What's the point, again? Put very simply, pursue godliness, and God will take care of everything else. Or, in Jesus' words, Mat.6:31. "Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'" 32 For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. 33 But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. 34 Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble."

Joseph, a godly young man of 30, was promoted to a position of great honor. And there is no hint of arrogance or self-sufficiency. He was God's man at God's time in the place God ordained. And that place was the place of influence, the influence which God would later use to bring his people into Egypt in the first place.

B. Joseph was promoted to a position of great influence.

The circumstances in Egypt were just as God prophesied, just as Joseph interpreted the dream.

v.47

And Joseph faithfully performed his task.

v.48-49

Incredible prosperity. The storehouses were so full they

couldn't even keep a record of how much they had. The numbers were too big, growing too rapidly. And evidently, no one complained of discrimination or profiteering. Apparently, no one felt victimized by injustice. Such disciplined, self-sacrificing preparation for the future.

And it was during those years of famine in which Joseph's authority was revealed the most.

v.53-55

Now it must have made sense to the people, why Joseph had been collecting and storing such an abundance of food. And now, no doubt, they too saw his great wisdom and his goodness, and submitted willingly.

Amazing, isn't it? Had the nation been left up their own devices, they would have been starving, too. Such famines have been recorded in the history of Egypt, the most closely parallel one seems to be the famine of 1064-1071. Seven years. No food. It is reported historically that people resorted even to cannibalism, eating the corpses of the people who had died.

Such famine usually leads to wholesale discontent and often violent unrest, even to anarchy. Many a government and nation has fallen as a consequence of such famine, for the people instinctually come to the government for help. In this case, the help was provided. Through Joseph's wise and discerning preparation.

Notice also that this wasn't a mere welfare program. The grain was sold to the people, sold at an equitable price to all who needed it. Had it been given away, it would have produced exactly what our welfare system today too often produces--waste, careless laziness, dependence and shortsightedness.

Under Joseph, the system was fair, and though the people undoubtedly had to live with much less than during the prosperous years, still they had food. And Joseph held the position of influence which provided it for them.

v.56

And just so you realize the extent of Joseph's influence, the extent of his exaltation, read,

v.57

The whole world came to Egypt. Including Joseph's own brothers, according to God's plan and purpose. One commentator suggests that the subject for this whole passage is "successfully encountering prosperity." For, as he writes, "to cope with prosperity may be more difficult than to cope with poverty." In many ways, he's right.

In this country, most of us have to learn to cope with prosperity. We have to learn to remain free from the love of money and material things. We need to be conscious of that, especially as we observe the Christmas season, for at no other time of the year is our excessive materialism more clearly displayed. Jesus' warning is so appropriate,

Luke 12:15 "Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses."

Instead, we read in,

1Tim. 6:6 "Now godliness with contentment is great gain. 7 For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. 8 And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content. 9 But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts

which drown men in destruction and perdition. 10 For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows."

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. 13 I urge you in the sight of God who gives life to all things, and before Christ Jesus who witnessed the good confession before Pontius Pilate, 14 that you keep this commandment without spot, blameless until our Lord Jesus Christ's appearing, 15 which He will manifest in His own time, He who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings and Lord of lords, 16 who alone has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see, to whom be honor and everlasting power. Amen."

I've skipped three verses so far, verses that describe Joseph's two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. By the names that they are given, it is these boys who most fully demonstrate Joseph's godliness and his absolute dependence upon the Lord. The boys themselves continue to reveal Joseph's prosperity and exaltation, for they become large and numerous tribes, two of the most prominent throughout the history of Israel. In fact, the two tribes would both come to be included in the twelve tribes of Israel, substituting for Joseph and Levi. So, in a direct sense, Joseph gets a double portion of the land, for he is divided into two tribes, Manasseh and Ephraim. And two boys, are in some sense, actually adopted by their grandfather Jacob as it is recorded in Genesis 48.

This morning, I want to focus on the names of these two boys,

for these names give us the fullest expression of Joseph's legacy.

III. THE LEGACY OF A GODLY MAN.

v.50-52

Here is where we really get to see and understand Joseph's faith, and here is where it is most personal for me. Many of us today name our children knowing the meaning of those names, and that was certainly the custom back in Israel. The names meant something, and they meant something about the parents. The names of the children show us the faith of the parents.

So what is Joseph's legacy? Manasseh and Ephraim. The Hebrew word "Manasseh" means to forget, or more fully, to cause to forget. And we're told what that has to do with the faith of Joseph.

v.51

Joseph's legacy is to teach us that,

A. God's blessings make us forget all our troubles.

I don't think that has to mean that God erases the information stored in our brains. Most often, he doesn't. It simply means that his blessings, when we experience them, do so completely overshadow past troubles that those troubles should fade from our conscious experience.

That doesn't make light of previous struggles. Again, information stored in the brain cannot simply be erased a matter of the will. Sometimes trauma particularly reminds in the mind as something you just can't get rid of, showing up in nightmares or even panic attacks. But in the big picture of spiritual well-being and a mature faith, God does sometimes provide sufficient blessing that enables those troubles to fade away.

Ultimately, he always does that, for the greatest of all blessing is our eternal inheritance, described this way,

Rev. 21:4 "And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away."

Such are the lessons of suffering. Such are the lessons of wanting something and not being able to have it. Such are the lessons of enduring difficulty. To learn that what is good comes as a gift and blessing from God, and ONLY as a gift and blessing from God. It is that perspective on life that enables us to endure all the troubles of this life by looking into the future of God's eternal blessings. And so we read in,

Rom. 8:18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us."

Manasseh. God's blessings make us forget all our troubles. And Ephraim. The word "Ephraim" means fruitful or fruitfulness.

B. God's blessings make us forget all our troubles.

And we're given Joseph's understanding of that in,

v.52

In our suffering, in the midst of our suffering, God's blessings come. In the midst of enduring great difficulty, then is when God often brings his richest blessing. God makes us fruitful IN our land of suffering. So don't always be so eager to leave that land of suffering!

Usually we pray for a way out of such a land. We pray to leave the land of suffering, to escape. But Joseph's faith, expressed in the legacy of his second son, teaches us this rich and meaningful truth. God's greatest blessings often come in the

land of great suffering and trial. Therefore,

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.”

You may find yourself in the land of suffering today. You may find yourself living with great trouble, sometimes perhaps beyond what you think you can bear. If that is the case, remember the names of these two boys and what they mean. God’s blessings will make you forget all your troubles by so richly overshadowing them. And God’s blessings will make you fruitful in the midst of your suffering.

In other words, there is hope. There is hope because God is a God of love who does richly bless those who love him. Hope for tomorrow, even if that tomorrow is eternity. And hope for today as well, for even in the midst of troubles, God is at work in marvelous ways, so that...

Rom. 5:3 “...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.”

On the other hand, you may be experiencing great blessings today. And if so, rejoice with the faith of Joseph, who learned how to endure great prosperity only because he had learned so well how to endure such deep poverty. Receive all that you have from God’s hand, and give him praise and thanksgiving in everything. Learn to say with the Apostle Paul,

Phil. 4:11 “Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: 12 I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I

have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. 13 I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”