

SET FREE AND RAISED UP

27th May 2018

Readings: Genesis 41:14-32; Hebrews 12:1-7

Have you ever known someone who's got ahead, super fast? They've been promoted over many heads to a top position. Their rise has been stellar, motoring past peers, reaching great heights. We see it in sports where an 18 year old finds himself playing super rugby while his friends are struggling to make the 1st VX. Just like Doug Howlett debuting for which team? (*for the Highlanders vs Waratahs - 9 May 1997*). We see it in child actor Macaulay Culkin, who shot to fame in what movie? (*Home Alone*). We can name others but what about such rises away from the public eye - in the work place. Maybe you've seen it in a large company or non profit such as a hospital or school. Maybe in local or central government. It happens, doesn't it? From zero to hero in double quick time.



But let me ask you this. How many of these high flyers go the distance? How many fall short of their potential. How many crash and burn? And we can see why. With new the opportunities there isn't always the maturity to cope. So, a young rugby player is exposed to an adult drinking culture, while a young actor has a truck load of money and with it family strife. And he workplace has it's own temptations.

So, it's with great interest we come to Joseph's story. For I challenge you to find a more rapid raise than with this young man. One morning he's eating prison gruel for breakfast but by afternoon he's seated at the right of the most powerful man in the known world. One morning he wakes in a damp, dark cell but by afternoon he's the second most important person in the land. It's sort of like Winston Peter's starting the day in prison serving an indefinite sentence but by dinner he's deputy prime minister, not of New Zealand but of the US.

Now, given so many people "fail to fire" or "crash and burn" when rapidly promoted and given Joseph rose to such a great height how does God prepare Joseph for success and not failure? I mean, what characteristics did God instill in Joseph so he would succeed and last the distance? These are the questions we're going to explore this morning.

I. How did God prepare Joseph?

II. What Characteristic did God instill in Joseph?

Let's pray

Let's dive right into the passage, Genesis 41. Straight away the scene shifts from prison to the palace.

When two full years had passed, Pharaoh had a dream: He was standing by the Nile, when out of the river there came up seven cows, sleek and fat, and they grazed among the reeds. After them, seven other cows, ugly and gaunt, came up out of the Nile and stood beside those on the riverbank. And the cows that were ugly and gaunt ate up the seven sleek, fat cows. Then Pharaoh woke up.
Genesis 41:1–4

This brings us to our first question

I. How Did God Prepare Joseph?

The answer is found in the first few words of the passage. When two full years had passed. Two full years since what? Since Joseph interpreted the dreams of Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker. Two full years since these dreams were dramatically fulfilled. And two full years since Joseph was forgotten. But more than this, it's thirteen full years since he'd been betrayed by his brothers and sold into slavery. Thirteen long years where adversity has piled up upon adversity. Trial after trial, tribulation after tribulation, suffering after suffering. But in all this... God has a purpose. Not one trial, not one tribulation, not one suffering was wasted.

a. Trial, Tribulation and Suffering

For it was in trial, tribulation and suffering that God prepared Joseph for success. How? Well, digging a bit deeper we see two ways God used thirteen years being a slave and in prison to prepare Joseph.

Firstly, let's look at it from a practical point of view. What does a seventeen year shepherd lad know about running a country? Think from sharing-hand to Prime Minister. What poly tech or university was available to Joseph? Where could he get the best administrative training possible? I'll tell you where. In the Poly Tech of the Lord. The God's university of pain. For while Joseph was a slave to Potihar he leaned to organise, manage and run a large household and estate - including learning to manage others and himself. Great training for running a country. But this was just undergraduate work for while in prison Joseph was studying his Masters in Management. Again his skills for organizing and managing a large organisation were sharpened. So, after thirteen years Joseph graduated from the University of Yahweh with first class honours and distinction. This meant that even though he moved from prison to place in a day he hit the ground running with all the skills needed to run the agricultural sector of an entire empire. So, this was first way God used trial, tribulation and suffering to prepare Joseph.

The second was to transform Joseph's heart. What do I mean by this? We've all come across highly skilled people but who're arrogant or bitter or manipulative. They have agendas or "chips on shoulders" and there's all sorts of nonsense. And that could have been Joseph. He certainly was an arrogant 17 year old, telling his family one day they'd bow to him - on more than one occasion. With the brashness of youth he wore his coat of many colours angering his jealous brothers so they finally resorted to violence. But look at the difference. This is not the same Joseph who steps up to take the signet ring of Pharaoh and sit at his right hand. Joseph could so easily be arrogant, bitter and revengeful - but no. God used trial, tribulation and suffering to refine and soften the heart of Joseph.

II. What Characteristic did God Instill?

But how did this happen? Not everyone who comes through suffering is a better person. We all know folk who've been through tough times but are now bitter and twisted. We all know people who've faced tribulation and it broke them or suffering and they've given up. What's the difference? What's the difference between those who suffering brings them closer to God and those who it doesn't? What characteristic did God instill in Joseph that not only prepared him for to succeed but stopped the trials crushing him?

The answer comes down to loyalty; loyalty to God. Time and time we see Joseph's unwavering loyalty. Let's pick up the story in the palace and see how this loyalty is expressed.

Remember there are the two dreams. First, seven fat cows are followed by seven skinny cows who eat up the fat cows. Then a second dream where seven healthy ears of corn on one stalk are followed by seven thin, shriveled ears that swallow up the healthy ones. Pharaoh is greatly troubled by these dreams but no one in the palace can explain it to him. At last the cupbearer remembers his shortcoming and Joseph is whisked up from prison - but not before a thorough wash and change of clothes. Now, notice Joseph's loyalty to God. Verse 15

Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I had a dream, and no one can interpret it. But I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it."

"I cannot do it," Joseph replied to Pharaoh, "but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires." Ge 41:15-16

"God will give". Loyalty. Pharaoh then recounts his dreams and Joseph interprets. Verse 25

Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, "The dreams of Pharaoh are one and the same. God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do. Genesis 41:25

Joseph explains that the dreams have the same meaning - seven years of plenty will be followed by seven years of severe famine. Then verse 28 and 32

It is just as I said to Pharaoh: God has shown Pharaoh what he is about to do... The reason the dream was given to Pharaoh in two forms is that the matter has been firmly decided by God, and God will do it soon. Genesis 41:28 & 32

All the time Joseph's gives God the glory and he always did. Remember Potiphar's house - remember how Joseph rebuffed Potiphar's wife's advances?... He said, "How can I sin against God" and in prison, "Don't all interpretations belong to God" and he's doing it now in the palace. And not just here but also in the home. In warm and moving account we see Joseph's loyalty to God in the home.

So, back to the palace. Pharaoh is amazed and grateful at Joseph's interpretation.

So Pharaoh asked them (*his officials*), "Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God?" Genesis 41:38

Joseph is then and there appointed as second only to Pharaoh and charged with managing the seven years of plenty and the seven years of famine.

Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I am Pharaoh, but without your word no one will lift hand or foot in all Egypt." Pharaoh gave Joseph the name Zaphenath-Paneah and gave him Asenath daughter of Potiphara, priest of On, to be his wife. And Joseph went throughout the land of Egypt. Genesis 41:44-45

And God soon blesses Joseph and Asenath with one son and then another. Notice how Joseph's loyalty to God is expressed in his family.

Joseph named his firstborn Manasseh and said, "It is because God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father's household." The second son he named Ephraim and said, "It is because God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering." Genesis 41:51-52

Joseph's loyalty to God even extends to the intimacy of his family and the naming of his two sons.

So, let's leave Joseph enjoying a lovely wife and two wee sons - isn't God good - and pull all this together? What've we learnt today? What's our take home. Well, in answer to our first question, "How did God Prepare Joseph for his rapid rise to fortune?" The answer was... through trial, tribulation and suffering. And it's the same with us. God uses difficulties to train us and refine us. To mold and shape us. To develop integrity and character so we're becoming more and more like Christ, whom we love and serve. Indeed because of the cross no pain need be wasted. This is why Joseph was able to say to his brothers...

You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. Genesis 50:20

and why we can join with Paul in Romans 8:28 saying

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him.
Romans 8:28

Yes, we enjoy the mountain tops - the good times - but God always uses our valleys for his glory.

Our second take home is the answer to our second question, “What characteristics did God instill in Joseph so he would succeed and last the distance?” And this is such a vital question for us. It’s so important. I mean, how many Christians have we known who were a bright light for Christ but have either crashed or burned - or simply faded away. We all know people like that. Maybe you feel like that. To stop this happening to us we must, like Joseph, develop an unwavering loyalty to God. Loyalty when facing temptation - remember Potiphar’s wife. Loyalty even when in our suffering or disappointment we feel abandoned by God. Loyalty before Pharaoh - in the work place, before our boss or work mates. Loyalty to God in the home - with our children, spouse our parents our extended families. A loyalty born from a radical dependence on God that sees his purposes in all circumstances and so we are content.

And, I wish I was there. I can see progress but how far I fall short at times. So, how do we develop this loyalty - unwavering in the tough times - constant in the mundane the everyday. How do we get it? Well, the answer is found in the example and empowering of Christ. For Jesus shows us both how to suffer and how to be loyal. See how these two weave together in Hebrews 12:2-3. The suffering and loyalty of Christ.

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. Hebrews 12:2–3

As we fix our eyes on Jesus we will both endure and remain loyal. Christ is our example in suffering because “of the joy set before him”. Likewise, this is our motivation. The joy of pleasing our Heavenly Father, of doing his will, of honouring his name. Yes, Christ who brought many to salvation and defeated Satan – Christ, he is our motivation and hope. As we fix our eyes on Jesus, he who endured great opposition - a mock trial, being spat upon, punched, whipped so his back was laid bare, nails through hands and feet, lifted up in agony - as we fix our eyes on him then every affection of our heart becomes captivated by his great love. Yes, for the

joy set before him Christ endured the cross even scorning it's shame. And there on the cross his loyalty to God shone as a great light in the darkness. Crying, "Father, forgive them they know not what they do" the words foreshadowed by Joseph are shouted out on the cross, "You intended to harm me but God intended it for good - the saving of many lives." Yes, this whisper of Genesis 50:20 becomes the shout on the cross on that first Good Friday

And so, we do not grow weary nor lose heart but have an unwavering loyalty to he who gave everything for us - his life, his all. So to Christ, Son of the Living God, our Saviour be all power and glory, majesty and honour, now and forevermore... Amen and Amen.