

OVERCOMING DISCOURAGEMENT

Genesis 40

Introduction:

Have you ever had days in your life when it seemed that nothing goes right? As a mother and housewife, maybe the children are sick, the washing machine breaks down and dumps water all over the floor, and then the bank calls to say that your loan is overdue because your husband forgot to make the payment. At work, the parts you needed didn't come in, the boss is grouchy and customers are unhappy because their work isn't done on time.

Perhaps you have been abandoned by a friend, or your spouse forgets to do something that was really important to you and you feel all alone, like no one cares. In ministry, in the family, in the workplace, in life, there will always times of discouragement, times when we feel abandoned. There are days, even weeks or months when many people feel that all is lost. But the question is, how do we respond to the discouragement that sometimes threatens to overwhelm us?

The Apostle Paul knew what it was to be discouraged. In 2 Cor. 1 he spoke of the despair he felt during his ministry in Asia. *Read vv. 8-9a*. Yet Paul recognized that, ultimately, God was working in his life even through his discouragement. *Read vv. 9a-10*. In fact, a bit later, Paul tells his readers that he is able to come through his discouragements because he knows that God is using the negative things in order to prepare him for something, both in this life and the next. Look at 1 Cor. 4:7-11.

But one of the keys in all of this is that the trouble we face and the discouragements that we endure must not be our own doing – consider the passage we read from 1 Peter 2. Suffering as a result of sin is a natural consequence and there is no credit for enduring that. But when we suffer at the hands of others, even when doing what is right and we come through it with faithfulness, Peter says that is a gracious thing in the sight of God. And then he gives us the example of Jesus Christ.

In our focus on the character of Joseph in the Old Testament we see in his life a series of disappointing and discouraging events. But he overcame his discouragement through a consistent and determined faith in his God, the God of his fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

In fact, as you look at the life of Joseph, if you were to try to graph the events of his life in terms of good and bad, there is a definite downward slope to it. He is taken down, then there is a bit of an upward movement, then another significant downturn—and so on.

This morning we look at Joseph in one of the most discouraging times in his life. Turn with me to Genesis chapter 39. *Review the events briefly and read vv. 19-23*.

Joseph in Prison

This appears to be another upturn in Joseph's life. But before we look at the details, I want to mention something which you may not be aware of. I only noticed this a few years ago. That is the question of where Joseph was imprisoned. I don't know there is any real significance to this, but it is interesting.

- Potiphar – the captain of the guard
- Joseph was put into the prison where the king's prisoners were confined – v. 20. Where was that?
- Look down to 40:3-4 – this was in the house of Potiphar. I don't know if the "keeper of the prison" in 39:21-22 was Potiphar himself, or more likely another warden under Potiphar, but the prison was in his house.

Now, there are some significant things we need to take note of in Joseph's situation at this point. There seems almost to be a pattern emerging in Joseph's life.

- v. 21 – the Lord was with Joseph. Sound familiar? See 39:2
- Joseph was given favor in the sight of the prison warden – see 39:4
- Joseph was put in charge of the prisoners – see 39:5
- The warden trusted Joseph completely with everything – see 39:6

So everything was going well for Joseph, except that he was still a prisoner. But he had some freedom and authority in the prison.

Dreams and Divine Appointments

It is interesting to note the role that dreams play in Joseph's life, both his own dreams and the dreams of others.

What I want to do here is to read chapter 40, pausing for some comments as we go through it and see the story unfolding.

Read vv. 1-4 – note who it was that entrusted these prisoners to Joseph's care – Potiphar, the captain of the guard.

Quote, Bill Crowder – “This was not some cosmic accident. It was a divine appointment. How necessary it is that we see this and embrace it. There is no such thing as a coincidence. God is in control of our lives. Nothing happens by accident. Everything occurs for a purpose.”

Even events which seem disturbing or inconvenient—a flat tire, a missed flight, an illness—when seen in retrospect, often show us that God had a reason for what took place. And here these prisoners from Pharaoh's court show up in prison with Joseph, by divine appointment.

Read vv. 5-8, commenting briefly.

When these new prisoners came into the prison it would have been easy for Joseph to have ignored them. After all he had enough problems of his own.

Quote, Bill Crowder – “How easy it would have been to turn away, thinking, ‘No one is caring about the mistreatment I have received. Why should I care about anyone else’s?’ But he didn’t... He had the grace to set aside his personal adversity and help others who were hurting.”

I think there is a lesson in there for us. How do we respond when facing disappointment and loss? Are we so wrapped up in ourselves that we have no time or interest in the needs of others?

With all that had happened to Joseph over the past 10 years or so, it would have been easy to have become discouraged and self-absorbed. The hatred of his brothers, being sold as a slave in Egypt, falsely accused and wrongly imprisoned... it is enough to make the most godly person

question whether God really knew or cared about him. Yet Joseph was faithful to his God and to his godly lifestyle. He knew that God does not make mistakes.

Let's keep reading... *read vv. 9-22* – the dreams and their interpretation. It happened just as Joseph had said.

Joseph now had new hope. Surely this was God's plan in sending these men to him there in prison. When the cupbearer, Pharaoh's steward returns to the palace, he will speak to Pharaoh about Joseph and he will be freed. But wait...

Read v. 23 – Joseph's sensitivity to this man is rewarded with what? He forgot Joseph. Earlier, Joseph's dedication to purity and doing what was right was rewarded with imprisonment. Now he again does the right thing and is rewarded by being forgotten.

Forgotten and Alone

So again Joseph finds himself in a situation that seems without hope. His only hope of getting out of that dungeon is gone.

Sometimes we read the story of Joseph and we lose sight of the time line. These events—being purchased as a slave by Potiphar, being falsely accused by his master's wife, being wrongly imprisoned, serving in the prison—these events do not happen over a period of weeks or even months. From the time the story begins with his dreams, until he is finally released from prison is 13 years. When the chief steward was restored to his position and forgot about him, two whole years went by before the next significant event in Joseph's life – 41:1.

It must have seemed to Joseph that he was forgotten. Certainly his brothers must have long since forgotten about him. Potiphar seemed to have forgotten him. His one hope of getting out of prison—Pharaoh's butler—had forgotten him. He had been abandoned by everyone. It would have been easy to give in to despair. But Joseph's trust was not just in people, he was trusting in the Lord.

And even though people had forgotten about Joseph, God had not. God knew him and his situation. And God was preparing him for something more than he could ever have imagined—but that's for next time.

Conclusion

So, how do you overcome disillusionment and disappointment. The simple answer is to keep your eyes on God and your trust in Him. But how do we do that? When we feel that life has dealt us a nasty blow, when it seems we have been abandoned and forgotten, when we are discouraged because God seems distant, how do we maintain our trust in God?

I would like to share with you three important things we need to remember. These come from Theodore Epp.

1. God's way is the wisest way. Training is always accompanied by some type of hardship. God trains us through trials, and develops our character through hardships. James says, *"The testing of your faith produces steadfastness (perseverance)"* James 1:3
2. God's time is the best time. God was working out His purpose through Joseph. It was impossible for Joseph to realize it at the time, but later he could look back and see that God's time had been exactly right—everything had worked out. But imagine the lonely years of waiting. This is an important lesson for us. God does not act too early nor too late. He is never in a hurry but accomplishes things in His own time. Too many of us either lag behind or run ahead of God's time. But we need to remember that the clock of divine providence keeps strict time. Because of our circumstances it may appear to be slow at times and fast at others, but the all-wise God knows precisely when to act.
3. Third, God's grace is sufficient. He will give us the grace we need to be patient. James 1:4 says, *"And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."* God is seeking to teach us valuable lessons so we will be mature believers. Hebrews 10:36 tells us, *"For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what is promised."* The secret of waiting *for* God is waiting *on* God through prayer, fellowship, and complete trust in Him.

So when you are faced with trials, remember Joseph. He spent years in God's waiting room. Don't give in to discouragement, but trust God and wait on Him to see what He is seeking to do in your live.