

“FROM PRISON TO PALACE” **(Genesis 41:41-57)**

Everyone loves a good rags-to-riches stories in which a nobody-from-nowhere makes it big. We think of someone like Abraham Lincoln who went from a log cabin to the White House – or Steve Jobs who started Apple Computer in a garage – and Dave Thomas, the founder of Wendy’s, who overcame numerous obstacles as a child to build a fast-food empire.

While these rags-to-riches stories focus on the drive and determination of the person, there are also the rags-to-riches stories where an average, ordinary person becomes rich or famous by luck or coincidence. Many of the reality TV shows are based on this story-line – where they find an ordinary, average person, put them on TV, and they suddenly become famous.

Then there are stories in which a person goes from rags-to-riches not by hard work and determination, not by luck, but by grace – like the story of Orphan Annie – the girl with no home or possessions who is suddenly adopted by a millionaire and is provided a life beyond her wildest imagination. Her change in condition had nothing to do with her drive and determination, it had nothing to do with luck or coincidence, but it had everything to do with the grace and kindness of the person who wanted her.

As we continue our study of the life Joseph this morning we come to a rags-to-riches story that beautifully illustrates the grace and kindness of God towards us – as well as a God who rewards faithful servants who persevere through long seasons of pain and suffering.

If you’ve been with us the last couple of months you know the storyline of Joseph’s life by now – how as a teenager God gave him a vision of his future – he dreamed that one day he would rise to prominence and his family would bow down to him. He didn’t know why – he didn’t know the timing or specifics of his dream – but he knew God had a grand plan and purpose for his life. But his dream appeared to be all but crushed when he was sold into slavery by his jealous brothers and purchased by Potiphar, a high-ranking Egyptian official.

Things look up when Potiphar notices Joseph’s work ethic and character and puts him in charge of his house and estate. But things take another downward turn when Joseph is falsely accused by Potiphar’s wife of assaulting her, and he’s thrown into prison. But God was with him and just as Joseph had caught Potiphar’s eye, he soon catches the eye of the prison warden who puts him in charge of the whole prison.

Joseph’s hopes rise when one of Joseph’s prison-mates – the king’s cupbearer – shares a dream with Joseph and Joseph interprets it. He says, “In three days you will be restored to your former position. When you get out, do me a favor – tell Pharaoh that I’m innocent and see if he will free me.” But the cupbearer forgot and Joseph languishes in jail for two more years.

Another ray of hope comes two years later when Pharaoh has a couple of dreams of his own, which none of his wise men can interpret. The cupbearer suddenly regains his memory and says, “I know a guy who can help you,” and tells him how Joseph’s interpreted his dream. And, just like that, Joseph goes from prison to the palace.

Pharaoh tells him his dreams about skinny cows eating up fat cows, and lean heads of grain swallowing up full heads of grain. Joseph says, “Your dreams mean that there will be seven abundant years followed by seven years of severe famine.” Then Joseph gives the king some advice... “During the seven good years take 20% of your crops and store them away in preparation for the seven lean years – that way you’ll be prepared when the famine hits.”

Pharaoh looks at Joseph and says, “I can’t think of anyone better than you to lead us during this crisis – it’s obvious that you have the spirit of God in you – as of right now I’m making you second-in-command over all my kingdom, and whatever you say goes.” There are few rags-to-riches stories better than Joseph’s.

As we pick up the story in the last half of chapter 41, I want to look at this passage through three lenses – first, we’ll look at how Joseph goes from rags-to-riches; second, we’ll look at how Joseph pictures Jesus’ rags-to-riches story going from humiliation to exaltation; and third, we’ll see how Joseph’s story applies to our rags-to-riches story.

We start with Joseph, whose life is suddenly and dramatically turned around. After suffering one setback after another for 13 years, God rewards him for his faithful endurance in four ways.

Joseph’s first reward is **authority**. Joseph knew from his teenage dream that he would one day be in a position of prominence, and now – suddenly and unexpectedly – that dream comes true. Verses 41-44... “So Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘I hereby put you in charge of the whole land of Egypt.’ Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his finger and put it on Joseph’s finger. He dressed him in robes of fine linen and put a gold chain around his neck. He had him ride in a chariot as his second-in-command, and people shouted before him, ‘Make way!’” Thus he put him in charge of the whole land of Egypt. Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘I am Pharaoh, but without your word no one will lift hand or foot in all Egypt.’”

Pharaoh first gives Joseph territorial authority – “I’m putting you in charge of the whole land of Egypt. The whole land is under your control – all the fields, all the crops, all the cities, all the rivers, and all the pyramids. You’re in charge of everything.”

Pharaoh also gives Joseph financial authority. Verse 42 says that he took his signet ring from his finger and puts it on Joseph’s finger. A signet ring was like an ancient credit card – it bore Pharaoh’s identification and was used to verify documents or transactions by pressing the ring into wax or stamping it on paper. Pharaoh says, “Here’s my MasterCard – whatever transaction you need to make, feel free – you’re the man.”

Joseph also receives a new wardrobe to match his new authority. Pharaoh tosses Joseph's prison clothes and replaces them with robes of fine linen and a gold chain. He's also given a company car – he gets his own chariot to travel around Egypt to do his work – and he's given immediate respect from the people as officials go ahead of him and clear people out of the way so he can pass through. Joseph's authority is so extensive that Pharaoh says, "Nothing happens from now on without Joseph's approval." It's a stunning, stunning role reversal for a man who just hours earlier was a forgotten prisoner rotting in jail.

Pharaoh also gives Joseph a new name and a new wife. Verse 45... "Pharaoh gave Joseph the name Zaphenath-Paneah and gave him Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On, to be his wife. And Joseph went throughout the land of Egypt." Zaphenath-Paneah is an Egyptian word that means "the god who speaks and lives," reflecting Joseph's ability to interpret dreams through God. By changing his name, Pharaoh wants to assimilate Joseph into the Egyptian culture, just as King Nebuchadnezzar changed the names of Daniel and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to integrate them into Persian culture. While kings had the power to change their names, they could not change their character. All these young men, exiled far from home, kept their faith in the one true God despite being immersed in pagan culture.

To further promote Joseph's social standing in Egypt, Pharaoh gives him an Egyptian wife named Asenath, the daughter of an Egyptian priest. We don't know much about her, but we know she raised to worship the pagan gods of Egypt. Joseph didn't really have much a choice in who he would marry, but it would appear that since their children were given Jewish names that she came to put her faith in Joseph's God.

The second reward Joseph receives for his faithfulness is wisdom. Verse 46... "Joseph was thirty years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh king of Egypt." I remember a seminary professor of mine repeated several times: Don't become a pastor until your thirty years old. He repeated this so often that it obviously stuck with me. He felt it very important that a young man get training and life experience before he leads a church.

It's not without coincidence that Jesus Himself began His ministry at age thirty. In Jewish culture thirty years was considered the age of full maturity and readiness for responsibility. The Levites began their priestly service at age thirty, and David was thirty when he became king. The pattern in scripture is that God prepares His servants before he uses them – and the process of preparation includes suffering and testing. A.W. Tozer said, "It is doubtful whether God can bless a man greatly until He has hurt him deeply." Joseph has been hurt deeply, and now God is blessing him greatly.

Verses 47-49... "During the seven years of abundance the land produced plentifully. Joseph collected all the food produced in those seven years of abundance in Egypt and stored it in the cities. In each city he put the food grown in the fields surrounding it. Joseph stored up huge quantities of grain, like the sand of the sea; it was so much that he stopped keeping records because it was beyond measure."

Joseph may have wondered by he spent 13 years managing Potiphar's house and then overseeing the warden's prison, but all that experience is now being put to use on a much broader scale in preparing for the famine. God never wastes an experience – as hard as some of the things you've gone through, God can transform it and use it for good.

Joseph puts his management skills to work by collecting all the food produced in the seven years of abundance – he tells everyone to take 20% of their harvest and store it up. A little sacrifice now will pay great dividends later. Proverbs 6 admonishes us to learn from the ants who work hard during the summer gathering up food when it's available in order to have food on hand for the winter when food is sparse. It's wise to save and plan for the future – not in worry – but using common sense to prepare for lean times.

Joseph does something else in these verses that is very wise. He sets up storage facilities in each city, so that each city can take ownership of their own future. People always work harder when they have incentive, and having each city be responsible for storing up their own grain motivated people to invest in their local economy so that they would not have to depend on someone else's food.

Just as Joseph predicted, there were seven years of abundant crops – more than enough to eat well during the seven good years and have plenty left over for the seven lean years. There was so much abundance that Joseph stopped keeping records – there was more than enough.

Not only did God promote Joseph to a position of authority and bless him with wisdom and success, but third, He blessed him with **healing** – healing of his painful memories Verses 50-52... “Before the years of famine came, two sons were born to Joseph by Asenath daughter of Potiphara, priest of On. 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.’”

After giving him a wife, God blessed Joseph with two children. The first he named Manasseh, which means “forgetting.” There's something about having a child that changes your perspective on life. As Joseph looked into the eyes of his newborn baby he smiled and said “God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father's household.” Joseph had a lot to forget, starting with his brothers who stripped him of his robe, threw him in a pit, and sold him for twenty shekels of silver – he had to forget being sold into slavery and being falsely accused by Potiphar's wife – he had to forget long, lonely years in prison where it seemed like he had no future.

Forgetting all the pain and suffering of the previous 13 years did not mean that the memories of all that happened to him was erased. We know they were still there because he later brings them up with his brothers. What Joseph meant by naming his son Manasseh is that God had removed the pain of his memory – the emotional sting that was once there was gone. He was no longer in bondage to the past – there was no bitterness or thoughts of revenge. God had placed His hands on Joseph's mind and heart and healed his pain.

Joseph named his second son Ephraim, which means “twice fruitful.” Egypt had been a place of suffering for Joseph, but now he had two sons and the place of affliction had turned into a place of fruitfulness. This is illustrated in the fact that Joseph stored up such huge quantities of grain that he stopped keeping records because it was beyond measure.

It’s a wonderful thing when you can come through times of trial with the kind of attitude Joseph had, burying his past hurts and rejoicing in his present blessings. He was forgetful and fruitful at the same time. It’s a tragedy when people still bear the pain of what others did to them, and are robbed of peace and joy. Only God can heal our hurts, and through His grace and power He can remove the sting of your memories and give you a fruitful, productive life.

Finally, number four, we see that God blesses Joseph with **impact**. The dream he had as a teenager begins to unfold. In verses 53-57 we read... “The seven years of abundance in Egypt came to an end, and the seven years of famine began, just as Joseph had said. There was famine in all the other lands, but in the whole land of Egypt there was food. When all Egypt began to feel the famine, the people cried to Pharaoh for food. Then Pharaoh told all the Egyptians, ‘Go to Joseph and do what he tells you.’ When the famine had spread over the whole country, Joseph opened all the storehouses and sold grain to the Egyptians, for the famine was severe throughout Egypt. And all the world came to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph, because the famine was severe everywhere.”

It's a great feeling to know you're making a difference in the world, and Joseph is being used of God to not only save Egypt from famine, but the whole world. As the water supply dries up and crops wither away in the sun, people from other regions hear that Egypt is the place to go for grain, and they flock to Pharaoh to help. Pharaoh says, “Don’t look at me – I don’t have the answers – go to Joseph and do what he tells you – Joseph is the man you want to see.” Because of Joseph, there was only one place in the world to find food, and that was Egypt.

Joseph’s biggest impact – and the reason God sent him to Egypt in the first place – was to save his family – the family God chose to bring Jesus into the world – and now Joseph is placed in a position that will save his people from extinction.

This leads us to the second lens through which we see this passage – and that is how Joseph provides a picture of Jesus’ humiliation and exaltation...

- Like Joseph, Jesus was loved by His Father and was clothed in honor and majesty, seated at the right hand of His Father in heaven.
- Just as God sent Joseph to Egypt to save his family from physical death, God the Father sent His son to earth to save the world from spiritual death.
- When famine hit the world, there was only one person who could save people – Pharaoh said, “Go to Joseph and do what he tells you.” Likewise, there is only one person who can save the world from sin, and the Bible says, “Go to Jesus and do what He says.” Peter said, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68).

1 Timothy 2:5 says... “There is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus.”

If people wanted bread – if they wanted to live – they had to come to Joseph. In the ancient world bread was symbolic of life – if you had bread to eat, you would live – if you didn’t have bread, you would die. Jesus used the feeding of the 5000 to teach the disciples that He was the bread of life. He said, “I am the bread of life – whoever comes to me will never go hungry.”

Some people bristle when you say that Jesus is the only way of salvation, but it’s true because Jesus is the only one who solved the problem of sin. Because God is holy and just, He cannot let sinful people into heaven – but John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life.” God sent His Son to bear the punishment of our sin and die in our place. No other religious leader has been able to do this, which is what makes Jesus unique. He is the only one able to rescue us from sin. So, if someone comes to you and says, “How can I be saved?” say, “Go to Jesus and do what He tells you to do – trust Him as your rescuer from sin.”

In coming to earth to be our Savior, Jesus suffered greatly – He had no home or place to lay His head, He was rejected and betrayed, He was falsely accused, He was jeered and spat upon, He was whipped and beaten and nailed to a cross. But like Joseph, Jesus – after His suffering and humiliation – was exalted to the highest place. Philippians 2:9-11 says... “Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” Joseph went from prison to the palace, and Jesus went from the cross to the grave, and from the grave to the right hand of God the Father in heaven where He reigns as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

This brings us to the third lens through which we see this story, and that is our own rag-to-riches story. The pattern of suffering followed by exaltation that Joseph and Jesus experienced, is the same pattern to which we are called to as believers.

To start with, we are called to suffer. Joseph was no doubt surprised, after receiving his dream of ascending to greatness, to go through as deep of suffering as anyone’s experienced for 13 years. And it takes many Christians by surprise – especially in America – that once they trust Christ for salvation that they experience suffering. Aren’t things supposed to go better after you become a Christian?

Peter says... “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed” (1 Peter 4:12-13). Peter says, “Don’t be surprised when your brothers betray you, when you’re sold as a slave, when you’re falsely accused and thrown into prison.” Suffering is part of everyone’s life in a fallen, broken world – and suffering is often intensified when you follow Christ and live according to the values of the Bible.

Not only that, but Peter says we are called as believers to participate in the sufferings of Christ. Jesus said, “A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master” (Matthew 10:24). Just as Jesus suffered, those who follow Him will suffer. Every single day Christians in other parts of the world are martyred for their faith. We never read about it in the mainstream press, but it happens every day. We don’t suffer nearly as much in our country, but it’s easy to see how the level of persecution in being ramped up, and if you are not ashamed to stand up for Christ you will indeed suffer.

But over and over and over and over in scripture we are told that suffering in this life is followed by glory in the next life. The story of Joseph beautifully pictures how God, after a long period of suffering, elevated Joseph to prominence. And Jesus, after His humiliation and death, ascended back to His glory and is exalted to the highest place. The same is true for you and me.

Romans 8:17 says, “Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.” Once this life of suffering is over, God’s children will be risen to glory. One day Christ is going to burst through the clouds, return to earth, and rule and reign over the earth, and we will rule and reign with Him.

In the Parable of the Minas, Jesus is pictured as man of noble birth who goes to a distant country to become king, and while He is away, He gives each of His servants different amounts of money to invest until He returns. When he returns one servant says, “I invested one mina and it has earned ten more.” Jesus said, “Because you have been trustworthy in a very small matter, I will make you ruler over ten cities.” The principle is clear: Whatever suffering you endure here on earth will be rewarded several times over in heaven. 2 Corinthians 4:17 says, “For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.”

If you are suffering right now, or if you suffer in the future, take heart... it’s only for a season. Your suffering will not last forever. And compared to all God promises us in heaven – eternal life, streets of gold, unending joy and happiness, and being set free from pain and suffering – all the troubles of this present world will seem like a feather in comparison to all the glory that awaits you.

As believers we have the ultimate rags-to-riches story, so take hope, keep enduring, keep pressing on – because one day – suddenly and dramatically – you’ll be released from prison to live in a palace, and be promoted to eternal glory in the presence of the Lord.