

Place: Lurgan Baptist 28:2:2010

GOD MEANT IT FOR GOOD (JOSEPH)

Reading: Genesis 40:1-23

5. THE ADVANTAGES OF ADVERSITY

The surgeon always mocked. He mocked his young assistant virtually every time he helped him perform an operation. He curled his sarcasm into a phrase which came to haunt the young man. Five stinging, searing words seemed to sum up what the young man judged to be the truth, though he had no affection for his superior. What were they ? “ *You’ll never be a surgeon.*” Years later Dr. A. J. Cronin was called to an isolated woodman’s home in Scotland on a freezing snow bound day. A tree had fallen on the woodsman and his injuries were serious, he needed immediate surgery. Dr. Cronin got him to the local hospital by the sledge and tried to phone Glasgow to get the injured man to a surgeon as he felt totally inadequate to carry out the required operation. *The telephone lines were down.* Undaunted Dr. Cronin tried to get the local station master to get a message via the railway network. No trains were running. The Doctor was in a corner. He looked at the anxious faces of the young family around him and at the body of the woodsman before him and suddenly there arose in his mind the words that he had heard years before.

They said, “ *You’ll never be a surgeon.*” He weighed the words and he scanned the anxious faces and then made his decision. He operated. A few months later the young woodsman walked out of that Scottish cottage hospital. Another phrase had been hurled at Joseph “ *We shall see what will become of his dreams,*” (37:20) said his brothers. What they had failed to realise was that when God gives a gift to anyone He doesn’t give it in order to later ignore it. The Lord makes sure that the gifted person is also given the sphere in which to exercise their gift. *Even a prison cell can become a platform for a gift to emerge.* You see, as we reflect on the story of Joseph so far we might be tempted to think that Joseph was almost superhuman. I mean his reaction to trials makes most of us feel that we are long way from being the kind of person Joseph was. But of course he was human. Indeed we get a glimpse of his human frailty as he pleads with Pharaoh’s cupbearer to put in a good word for him. (40:14) But Joseph was treated unjustly again, for the cupbearer forgot him. (40:23)

What a trail of injustice Joseph experienced. He was opposed, imprisoned, maligned, misunderstood, slandered, falsely accused, and wrongly persecuted, yet he discovered there are definite advantages to adversity. On 27th November 1965, Howard E. Rutledge parachuted into the hands of the North Vietnamese when his jet fighter was shot down. On 1st December he was placed in cell number two in “ *Heartbreak Hotel,*” the infamous prison where American POW’S were held in Hanoi. He tells in vivid language the pain of his imprisonment. He writes,

“ When the door slammed and the key turned in that rusty iron lock, a feeling of utter loneliness swept over me. I lay down on the cold cement slab in my six by six prison. The smell of human excrement burned my nostrils. A rat as large as a small cat, scampered across the slab beside me. The walls and floors and ceilings were caked with filth. Bars covered a tiny window high above the door. I was cold and hungry. My body ached from swollen joints and sprained muscles. You are locked in, alone and silent in your filthy little cell, breathing stale, rotten air and trying somehow, to keep your sanity.” My Why would God allow something as evil as this to happen to one of His children ? Why would the Lord ever allow such pressure to come to pass in a person’s life, that they feared for their very survival ? By the time Howard Rutledge was released in 1972 he had learned that there are advantages in adversity. What are they ? Well, consider Joseph. Here he is a young man of twenty eight years of age (37:2 41:46 41:1) in the dungeon. **And in the dungeon,**

(1) MATURITY WAS BEING REALISED

The Psalmist looking back could say, *“ It is good for me that I have been afflicted.”* (119:71) Alexander Solzhenitsyn imprisoned under Communism in Russia could say, *“ Bless you prison for having been in my life.”* Ultimately, Joseph could say, *“ Bless you, prison, because it was there God became real.”* Years later Joseph could look back and recognize that the Lord meant it for good. How could imprisonment be for Joseph’s good ? Well,

through this imprisonment, Joseph was being trained in the school of God. Joseph was learning,

(a) THE LESSON OF PERSECUTION:

You see, suffering is not unusual for the believer. Do you recall Paul’s words to Timothy ? *“ Yea, and all that live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.”* (2 Tim 3:12) We should not be surprised when we suffer unjustly. Peter says, *“ Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you.”* (1 Pet 4:12) Somehow we seem to regard suffering as something out of step with what following Christ is all about. After all doesn’t (Rom 8:28) promise that *“ all things work together for good to them that love God ?”* But what is *“ good,”* ? Most people think of **“good,”** as health, security and prosperity. Is that how you think ? If you do then you’re going to be surprised by suffering. How did we come to the conclusion that following Christ is just like a walk in the park ? Where did we get the idea that serving Christ is a guarantee against pain and suffering ? We did not get it from Christ. He promises the opposite.

Do you recall His words ? *“ In the world ye shall have tribulation.”* (Jn 16:33) Did Christ not suffer unjustly ? What about Joseph ? Sure his life-story to this point is nothing but a saga of suffering, even though he had committed no evil. My I may be wrong but as we look to the future, fundamental, Bible believing Christians are in for a hard time. When we insist on the authority of Scripture, and Jesus Christ being exclusive, that is the

only Saviour of sinners we will be vehemently opposed. So don't be surprised when you suffer for being a believer. (a)

(b) THE LESSON OF PERSEVERANCE:

One problem you face when you suffer unjustly, is that you are tempted to quit, to throw in the towel. I mean Joseph is a classic example of someone who had every reason to say, “ *What’s the use to trying to be righteous.* ” Can you see him as he sits in that Egyptian dungeon ? He could have said, “ *That’s it. I might as well do what everyone else does. I don’t see where trying to obey God and maintain my integrity is working for me. I thought I was mistreated before, but now I’m in prison because of a perverse woman. I don’t deserve this.* ” Are you tempted to reach the same conclusion ? Do you recall what the psalmist in the 73rd Psalm said ? After looking at the prosperity of the wicked he said, “ *Verily I have cleansed my heart in vain and washed my hands in innocency.* ” (73:13) What he was saying was this. *Is it worth it to be a Christian ?* It was only when he went into the house of God that he saw things in their true perspective. (73:17) So often it seems that the rascals who are lying with all the women of the day, cheating on their taxes, sinning to their hearts content are having a great time, while the godly often wind up in the pit for doing right.

How is it that Joseph did not whine and quit when his life kept taking a wrong turn ? Why was this ? Because he

determined, to do the right thing no matter what the cost and no matter where it took him. Do you feel like quitting ? Then consider Christ. “ *Consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds.* ” (Heb 12:3) Are you having a hard time ? Think of Christ. Is someone maligning you ? Think of Christ. Do you feel like throwing in towel and giving up ? Think of Christ. Consider what He endured and don't give up. (a) (b)

(c) THE LESSON OF PATIENCE:

You see, when Joseph predicted the butler's restoration to office, he asked the butler to remember him to Pharaoh so he could be released from prison (40:15) but the butler so Joseph continued two more years in a dark, dismal, discouraging prison. (41:1) He needed great patience to survive those two years of waiting, if he was going to be in good enough spiritual condition to fulfill his later role as Prime Minister. James Stalker said, “ *Waiting is a common experience of providential discipline for those to whom exceptional work has been appointed.* ” Yet in our faster than sound, and instant replay age we know little of this discipline of patience and we value it even less. Yet the Bible tells us that many of the great servants of God had to experience a waiting period, before being called to high duty. Moses waited eighty years before he became Israel's great emancipator, John the Baptist, had to wait thirty years before he began his ministry. Elijah had wait in lowly Cherith and Zarephath for three years before his great ministry on Mount Carmel. What about Paul ? Did he not have several waiting periods in his

ministry ? (Acts 9:30 11:25) You see, God's does everything in His time. God does everything at the right time. God does everything in the fullness of time. " *And it came to pass at the end of two full years.* " (41:1) God was teaching Joseph the lesson of patience. Joseph was learning to wait on God. The Bible says, " *But they that wait on the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, and they shall walk and not faint.* " (Is 40:31) Has God enrolled you in the school of patience ? Are you learning to wait on Him ? Do you realise that one of your goals must be not only to discern God's *what's* for your life, but also God's *when's* ? (1)

(2) MINISTRY WAS BEING EXERCISED

Did you know there is an entire section of epistles in the New Testament that are referred to as the " *prison epistles* ?" Paul wrote Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon while incarcerated in a Roman prison. The apostle John wrote the book of Revelation while in exile on the isle of Patmos. John Bunyan the author of " *Pilgrims Progress*," wrote his classic while in prison. My great things can happen in the midst of adverse circumstances Make no mistake about it, Joseph didn't deserve jail but he responded to it beautifully. For in the dungeon he exercised a ministry. Notice it was,

(a) A HELPFUL MINISTRY:

Look if you will at (40:7) Does that not say a lot about Joseph ? He cared enough about the men he served to ask

why they were so sad. My Joseph could have said to himself, " *Look I've got my own problems. I'm the one who should be dejected. Forget these men.* " I mean if anyone seemed to have a right to sadness it was Joseph. Nobody asked him how he felt. Nobody enquired about his mood. It was obvious that Joseph wanted to cheer them up. His thought was all for the others. Here was another shadow of His Lord touching the edge of His life for it was not the Saviour on the Cross who washed His disciples feet, and who, in the agony of pain, later made provision for the care of His mother ? You see, instead of being absorbed in his own situation and groveling in self pity, Joseph took the opportunity to minister to the two men who were in need of help.

On Thursday 18th February 2010, just a few days ago I along with David Legge ministered at a funeral in the Iron Hall. I had never seen the new building as packed as that morning. The Christian who had died was a lady by the name of Geraldine Harris. Geraldine had suffered physically most of her life, but was a bright, shining, light for the Lord. She had also a great sense of humor. In the last days of her life in the hospice in Belfast her eldest son, leaned over his Mum one day and said, " *Are you alright Mum ?* " She said, " *I was until I saw your ugly face.* " Just before Christmas I called to see her in the Ulster Hospital. I had come in on the heels of her consultant who had said to her, that there was nothing more they could, the cancer was right through her. I was sitting beside her, and she said, " *Denis, I've left in the hands of the Lord, He makes no mistake.* " The patients in the ward were asking her, " *Why have you*

such peace, in light of such terrible news.” Geraldine stood up and gave them her testimony. But the interesting thing about this lady was this. All of her life she was in the dungeon of suffering. Yet from her hand and heart there came hundreds of inspiring letters to those were passing through times of storm. You see, there is no ministry to those who are suffering like the ministry given by another sufferer. This is exactly what Paul meant when speaking of God he said, “ *Who comforeth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God.*” (2 Cor 1:4) Are you in a dungeon at the moment ? Are your circumstances harsh and bewildering ? Like Joseph will you reach out to others who are hurting and minister to them ? (a)

(b) A SKILFUL MINISTRY:

For in response to the dreams of these two men, Joseph said, “ *Do not interpretations belong to God ?*” (40:8) Like a flash he turned their attention to God. He didn’t say, “ *Have you heard about my gift fellows ? You have come to the right man.*” Instead Joseph said, “ *Do not interpretations belong to God ? Tell them to me please.*” God got all the glory. As Vance Havner put it, “ ***The man who thinks he is too big for a little place is too little for a big place.***” Joseph did not despise his lowly position he just gave God the glory in every situation. Clearly he had a unique gift from God in the ability to correctly interpret dreams. But his perspective was clear. He didn’t boast of his skill or seek to draw attention to himself. He pointed to the Lord as the source of his gift and gave Him all the

glory. Later when he stood before Pharaoh and Pharaoh said, “ *I have heard say of thee, that thou canst understand a dream to interpret it. And Joseph answered Pharaoh saying, it is not in me God shall gave Pharaoh an answer of peace.*” (41:15-16) “ ***I cannot do it, but God can.***” Do you want to be used of God ? Is your life God focused ? Is your need of Him total ? We cannot do it. And if we think we can we need to step aside and sit down. You see, God wants to get the glory for all the good that happens in and through your life. Paul says, “ *That we should be to the praise of his glory, who first trusted in Christ.*” (Eph 1:12) What is man’s chief end ? But to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. My God cannot move mightily in our lives until we come to the complete end of ourselves so that He gets all the glory for what happens. Is this not diametrically opposed to the attitude of the world ?

The world’s way of promotion is by self exaltation. Pushing yourself forward. You pull the strings and you advance yourself. You advertise yourself, you promote yourself. And a lot of people get to the top that way. But the Bible says, “ *Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God that he may exalt in due time.*” (1 Pet 5:6) Leave it to God to order and control.

(c) A FAITHFUL MINISTRY:

It’s interesting to notice that Joseph’s life developed in relation to three sets of two dreams each. One set Joseph dreams himself. (37:9) the second set the butler and the baker dream. (40:8) and the third set are the dreams of

Pharaoh. (41:1) Joseph's dreams were of *sheaves and stars*, the dreams of this chapter of *branches and baskets* and the final dreams of the king were of *cattle and corn*. And in all Joseph spoke the truth whether it was good news or bad news. The butler or cupbearer was the person who tasted the wine and food of the king before he ate or drank. Telling the butler his future was delightful, telling the baker his future was dreadful but Joseph spoke the truth regardless. Now it would have been easy for Joseph to soothe this man and tell some sweet little lies. After all, in three days he would be dead. Joseph would have nothing to answer if he lied to him, but he was faithful to his soul. ***Many would be preachers fail this test.*** Do you ever hear some ministers at funerals ? Not a word of truth, grace, or warning. Men who are willing to soothe the feelings of dying men and women and assure them they are all right. My when you are dealing with eternal matters do you want to go to some place where someone will tell you lies ? ***The lesson from the dungeon is, that if you are going to be the servant of God, you're going to have to tell the truth, and live with the blast of criticism you'll receive.***

Just before his death, Paul told his spiritual son, Timothy “ *Preach the Word for the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers having itching ears.* ” (2 Tim 4:2-3) Many like to preach grace but few like to preach judgment. Many like to preach the positive but few like to preach the negative. But the same Bible that tells of heaven speaks of hell. Is your ministry

faithful ? Faithful to God, to His Word, to the souls of men ? I wonder did the baker say to Joseph, “ *Joseph, I'm scared to death. You seem to know the true God, can you help me ?* ” Let me tell you the baker got a deal. He had seventy two hours to prepare. You have no such guarantee. That's why the Bible says, “ *Now is the accepted time, behold now is the day of salvation.* ” (2 Cor 6:2) Are you prepared to die ? If you died now, would it be heaven or hell ? Gloom or glory ? (1) (2)

(3) MYSTERY WAS BEING VISUALISED

The mystery of God's providence was seen in that dungeon. I mean, *where was God ?* We can see God in the good things. But where is God when the dungeon experience occurs ? Where is God when all is unfair ? Does His silence mean He is absent ? As if Joseph had not suffered enough crushing disappointments we now see,

(a) THE FORGETFULNESS OF THE BUTLER:

For, he forgot Joseph. (40:23) Can you imagine on the day of his release, grabbed Joseph by the hand and said, “ *Joseph thanks for what you did for me. You can expect to hear from me. I'm your man Joe.* ” Have you ever heard those words from someone and a year later your phone still hasn't rung ? Perhaps someone you thought loved you, told you, “ *I'm yours,* ” then left never to heard from again. Wives abandoned by husbands, husbands without wives, children without parents, parents without children and so on, *How do we deal with the disappointment of unfulfilled dreams ? How do we deal with the fact that*

*people just let us down sometimes ? Can you imagine the first week after the butler's release, Joseph saying to himself, " Well I can't expect him to rush right away into the presence of Pharaoh. My butler friend will be busy getting reunited with his family." Then another week passed and another and no doubt Joseph still remained cheerful. " He hasn't found an opportunity yet. He'll want to wait for the right moment." But the weeks became months, the months became a year, and the truth hit him the butler had forgotten him. Are you experiencing the forgetfulness of friends ? Even the best of persons will prove to be a disappointment to us at times. **Why should we be surprised ?** After all, we fail and disappoint others. We projects incomplete and promises unfulfilled. When we ever learn that people are as fickle as the weather and often change with their circumstances ? Only God is unchangeable. Is this not what Joseph discovered in the dungeon ? He discovered that over against (a) there stood,*

(b) THE FAITHFULNESS OF THE LORD:

How many times must we learn the lesson that God is the only unfailling One ? He is the only One who is true to His Word on every occasion. The Psalmist says, "*Some trust in chariots and some in horses but we will remember the name of the Lord our God.*" (20:7) Joseph had been forgotten by the butler, but he had not been forgotten by the Lord. *What do you do when you feel forgotten by people ? Where do you turn when you are so weary you feel you cannot take another step ?* Go back to the Word of God and listen to this statement. When you feel abandoned, when you feel no one cares, when you begin

to wonder if God even knows where you are, listen to His voice. "*But Zion said, the Lord hath forsaken me, and my Lord hath forgotten me. Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb ? yea, they may forget, yet will I will not forget thee. Behold I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands.*" (Is 49:14-16) Isn't that wonderful ? God has not forgotten you. God has not abandoned you. God is not going to ever forsake you. Is this not the lesson that the Lord was teaching Joseph ? Saying to him, "**Joseph, men will forget you. You can count only on Me. I will never forget you.**"

**Forget thee I will not I cannot thy name
Engraved on my heart doth for ever remain
The palms of my hands which I look on I see
The wounds I received when suffering for thee**

Like Joseph, are you in a dungeon experience ? Do you feel abandoned, forgotten, hurt ? Will you learn to rest in God's unchanging faithfulness ? For "*The Lord will perfect that which concerneth you.*" (Ps 138:8)

Acknowledgments:

Joseph & Ruth: Derick Bingham (Ambassador)

The Hand of God: Alistair Begg (Moody)

God meant it for Good: David Jeremiah (Turning Point)

Joseph: John Butler (Regular Baptist Press)

Joseph: Charles Swindoll (Thomas Nelson)

People of the Old Testament: J. Philips (Kregal)

Rev Ron Jonstone (Bible Study Notes)

Pastor Victor Maxwell (Bible Study Notes)

