

The Timing of Providence


 JOSEPH


"Joseph was thirty years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh king of Egypt."

Genesis 41:46a



DEVOTIONAL

Hope is that one non-physical quality without which abundant life is finally impossible. Take away a man's livelihood and he will press on, doing what he can to find work, as long as he has hope the right job opportunity is out there. Let a woman's friends and family abandon her and she will not give up on all relationships, as long as she has hope that things will get better. Destroy the hope of either, however, and they will descend into nihilism, suffering its dreadful consequences.

If anyone in the Bible had reason to be hopeless, it was Joseph. Here was a man who was sold into slavery by his brothers, likely never to be rescued (Gen. 37:25–28). But circumstances were not always this bad, for Potiphar bought him and eventually appointed him to a high position in his house (39:1–6a). Unfortunately, this improvement in his situation was only temporary, for Joseph was thrown in jail, even though he was an innocent man (vv. 6b–20). He also gained rank while in prison, which was a good thing, although it certainly was not as good as being a free man (vv. 21–23). Eventually, hope flickered for Joseph when a fellow prisoner promised to put in a good word for him with the king (40:1–22). But that hope all but died when this fellow prisoner forgot all about him. Two more years passed until Joseph had the opportunity to enjoy the favor of the pharaoh and rule over Egypt as the king's second in command (40:23–41:57).

Thirteen years passed from the time Joseph entered slavery at age seventeen until he became the pharaoh's right-hand man in Egypt at thirty years of age (37:2; 41:46). Even though the Scriptures stress that during this period the Lord was with Joseph (39:2, 21), this is seen more easily in retrospect. Though he never lost hope in God completely, knowing he was sustained until the day of his exaltation, Joseph no doubt struggled with trusting God at times, since He took what seemed the most circuitous route possible to vindicate His servant. God, of course, had the greater good in view the whole time, eventually putting Joseph in a place where he would save many people. This truth applies to us today: God providentially directs all things — even pain — toward His greater good. Even when we cannot see how, the Lord is working all things to the ends of our good and His glory.

CORAM DEO (In the Presence of God)

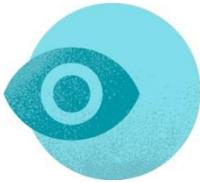
In the midst of trouble and suffering, it can be difficult to believe that the Lord knows exactly what He is doing. So often it is easier to despair, believing that God has abandoned us and that He will not keep His promise to work all things together for the good of His children (Romans 8:28). But our Father is sovereign, and He is working for our ultimate good and for the advance of His kingdom even when things seem darkest to us.¹

¹ <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/timing-providence/>



OPEN IT

1. Does it bother you to wait? What kind of waiting is hardest for you? What is your response to these moments of waiting?



READ IT

Genesis 40:12–15, 23–41:1

Then Joseph said to him, "This is its interpretation: the three branches are three days. In three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your office, and you shall place Pharaoh's cup in his hand as formerly, when you were his cupbearer. Only remember me, when it is well with you, and please do me the kindness to mention me to Pharaoh, and so get me out of this house. For I was indeed stolen out of the land of the Hebrews, and here also I have done nothing that they should put me into the pit..." The chief cupbearer, however, did not remember Joseph; he forgot him. When two full years had passed...



EXPLORE IT

2. What had Joseph done for the cupbearer?
3. What did he ask in return for his help?
4. What did the cupbearer do?
5. How long did Joseph wait?

APPLY IT

Let Down by Others



From the human standpoint, Joseph's life up to this point could be viewed as a series of crushing disappointments and shattered dreams. And in the dungeon in Egypt, he was about to suffer yet another setback: "The chief cupbearer, however, did not remember Joseph; he forgot him" (Genesis 40:23).

I imagine that on the day of his release, the man 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 somebody, and six months later your phone still hasn't rung? Perhaps someone you thought loved you told you, "I'm yours," and then left, never to be heard from again. How do we deal with the disappointment of unfulfilled dreams? How do we deal with the fact that people just flat out let us down sometimes?

Let's learn something important from Joseph. We can only assume that there was a great expectation in Joseph's heart as the cupbearer was restored to his position. In those first days after the cupbearer's release, Joseph's spirit probably quickened every time he heard a rattling at the door of the dungeon. "They're coming to release me." Putting it in contemporary terms, Joseph would have been saying, "If the phone rings, don't touch it. It'll be for me." But the first call wasn't for Joseph. Neither was the second or the third. And as the days lengthened into weeks and then months, Joseph came to realize there was not going to be a call from the cupbearer.²

6. How would the hope of a speedy release have given Joseph an ability to weather the storm he found himself in?

7. With each passing day what emotions would replace Joseph's hope of being released?

8. When have you been promised something only to be let down? How did you feel and what did you do?

The two added years of imprisonment gave Joseph yet another chance to learn the lesson that God is faithful and that he could rest his hopes in the Lord. How many times we must relearn the lesson that God is the only unfailing One. He is the only One who is true to His Word on every occasion. "Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God" (Psalm 20:7). It appeared to Joseph that he had been forgotten—and he had, by the cupbearer. But he had not been forgotten by his Lord and Master.

What do you do when you are forgotten by people? What do you do when you have taken a few too many blows to the shins, too many elbows in the ribs as you've run the race of life? Where do you turn when you are so weary you feel you cannot run another step? What you do is look away from people and look up.

When I am weary and disappointed, I go back to my Bible, where I read: The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint (Isaiah 40:28–31).³

What tremendous promises to the weak and weary! That's all of us at one time or another. If you can learn to rest in God's faithfulness, you can sleep secure in any storm.⁴

² *The Hand of God: Finding His Care in All Circumstances* by Alistair Begg

³ *The Hand of God: Finding His Care in All Circumstances* by Alistair Begg

⁴ *The Hand of God: Finding His Care in All Circumstances* by Alistair Begg

9. Read Isaiah 2:22 and Jeremiah 17:5. Was it wrong for Joseph to hope that the cupbearer might be the key to his release?

10. When does trusting men move into the arena of sin? What situations or circumstances in life cause us to turn to other people instead of relying on God?

11. Read Psalm 118:8. When have you seen God's faithfulness amidst the faithlessness of others around you? How did God prove His faithfulness to you?

Letting Others Down

See here an instance of base ingratitude (from the cupbearer). Joseph had ministered to him, sympathized with him, helped him to a favorable interpretation of his dream, had recommended himself to him as an extraordinary person upon all accounts and yet he forgot him.⁵

12. Put yourself in the shoes of the cupbearer. What are some possible reasons that he might have forgotten to mention the plight of Joseph to Pharaoh?

13. Read Amos 6:6. What does this say about how the cupbearer spent the two years following his release from prison?

14. Why are we so quick to forget our own time in prison when our lives get better? What causes us to be so quick to forget our fellow prisoners who remain incarcerated by their circumstances and troubles?

15. When have you let someone down or promised something and then failed to come through in the end? How did it make you feel? How did the other person feel?

⁵ Matthew Henry Commentary on Genesis found @ <http://www.studylight.org/commentaries/mhm/genesis-40.html>

16. What things keep us from fulfilling our promises to others? What should we do when we fail others?
17. What should the cupbearer have done? What characteristics does it take to fulfill one's vows to God and others?

Waiting On God

Wait for God! We are too feverish, too hasty, too impatient. It is a great mistake. Everything comes only to those who can wait. "They that wait on the Lord shall inherit the earth." You may have had what Joseph had when still a lad—a vision of power and usefulness and blessedness. But you cannot realize it in fact. All your plans miscarry. Every door seems shut. The years are passing over you with the depressing sense that you have not wrought any deliverance in the earth. Now turn your heart to God; accept his will; tell Him that you leave to Him the realization of your dream.

"Wait on the Lord, and keep his way, and He shall exalt thee to inherit the land: when the wicked are cut off thou shalt see it" [Psalm 37:34].

He may keep you waiting a little longer; but you shall find Him verify the words of one who knew by experience his trustworthiness:

"The salvation of the righteous is of the Lord; He is their strength in the time of trouble. And the Lord shall help them, and deliver them; He shall deliver them from the wicked and save them, because they trust in Him" [Psalm 37:39–40].⁶

18. What causes us to want to move so quickly away from our place of waiting? How does one discipline oneself to wait on the Lord?
19. The old adage reminds us that "time heals all wounds." What "wounds" in Joseph's past might have needed some time to heal? How did this extended time of waiting have prepared him for his future?
20. What "waiting room" or "cell" does God have you in right now? How does Joseph's example teach you about your response when God places you there?

⁶ *Joseph: Beloved, Hated, Exalted* by FB Meyer