

“Prospering In the Prison”

Genesis 39:20-23

If you have your Bible, turn with me to Genesis 39, and in a moment we will read from verses 20-23. In 2017, I spent a few weeks in southeast Asia with some contacts I had who were serving with the International Mission Board. One of the places I spent some time was in Hanoi, Vietnam. While there, I toured the infamous ‘Hanoi Hilton.’ That was the nickname given by American POWs to the Hỏa Lò Prison. It became infamous during the Vietnam War for its brutal treatment of captured American servicemen, including John McCain, who was imprisoned there for over five years after his plane was shot down in 1967. While much of it has been demolished, part of it remains as a museum. And let me tell you, I wouldn’t want my worst enemy to be confined in such a place. It was totally dark with small concrete cells with cold concrete slabs that the prisoners were confined to with iron shackles—a miserable dungeon to say the least.

Several years ago when I pastored in Morganton, Anita and I volunteered with a mission organization that did evangelism in prisons. I made several trips to Uganda and Kenya, and I got to witness firsthand many of those prisoners come to faith in Jesus. Prison can be a spiritually eye-opening place. Prison is often a place where people come to faith in Jesus because it strips away all the distractions and self-reliance that keep people from seeing their spiritual need. It is often in prison that a man or woman hits rock bottom. And this brokenness often exposes the failure of their ways, making them more open to grace, forgiveness, and transformation through Christ.

But what about the person who finds himself in a prison for having done the **right** thing?

When someone does wrong, we get that there are consequences. And when someone does right, experience and intuition tells us that they ought to be rewarded. However, this is not always the case. In fact, there are times with doing the right thing will cost you in the short-term. One of the questions that we’ve all asked at some point is the question, “Why do the wicked prosper as the righteous suffer?” Such is the same question that we might ask as we read in our text of how Joseph is sent to prison for something that he didn’t do. (Read)

Why would God allow such a thing to happen? I mean if anyone deserved to be rewarded for his integrity, it was Joseph. We've watched as he has made the best of a bad circumstance. Forced into a bad situation that he did not choose, he made the most of it. Nowhere do we read of him complaining or protesting. There is no evidence of bitterness. Instead, he commits himself to the task at hand and becomes a successful man in the house of Potiphar. And this is because the Lord was with him. God had been protecting him despite all that stood against him. But as circumstances would have it, Joseph will once again find himself in an unwanted situation. And this time, it will be Potiphar's wife who tries to seduce him into sin. He resists her advances because he refused to commit an act of such 'great wickedness' against God. Joseph's reply to her shows that his ethics were not situational or relative, "If it feels right, it must be right." For Joseph, there were absolute values—there is such a thing as sin. And he made up his mind that he would not commit an act of great wickedness against God.

And after continually refusing her advances, the situation spirals into accusation and lies. Joseph had kept his purity, but he was about to lose his position. He lost his coat, but he kept his character. He is falsely accused by Potiphar's wife and locked up in prison. Better to be locked up in the prison while holding onto your integrity than to enjoy luxury in the house by forfeiting it!

In the prison, Joseph will have to be patient and learn to wait. Of course, that is a word that none of us wants to hear. We don't like to wait. And the reason is that waiting is hard. It seems so unproductive. When we are on our way somewhere, we don't want to be delayed. We don't want to be hindered. When we want something, we want it now. All of us grow impatient and irritable whenever we have to wait for something. Spiritually, all of us will be faced with seasons of waiting for God's purposes to be realized. So many times, however, you and I miss the opportunity to watch the Lord work in mighty and miraculous ways. Why? Because instead of standing still and watching Him pull off our deliverance, we seek out the worldly alternative. We look for the back door, the fleshly shortcut. In our weakest moments, we hear the tempter's voice to take matters into our own hands instead of trusting in the Lord's promise and waiting for Him to work.

Hebrews 10:35-36—“Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised.”

“Endurance” — word is ‘hupomone’ and means patience that continues; the characteristic of a person who is not swerved from his deliberate purpose by even the greatest trials

It is the same word used in James 1:3 that says the testing of our faith produces ‘endurance.’ It is descriptive of a persevering attitude that holds up when under pressure. In life, things almost never turn out the way we expect them to, especially at the first. If we apply this to the church, we can guarantee that no truly successful ministry ever moves forward without time and difficulty. We are so enamored with success that we have lost sight of its true definition—faithfulness. I can’t help but believe that sometimes we have quit before God has even started. If God expected us to give up every time that encounter a little bit of difficulty, the work of God would never get off the ground. Joseph discovers that difficulty in the plan of God doesn’t mean His plan has gone off the rails. Rather, it is something that we ought to expect. Sometimes, life leads to a prison that we can’t avoid. That’s the way things went in Joseph’s life.

There is an interesting statement made by the psalmist:

Psalm 105:16-19—“When [the Lord] summoned a famine on the land and broke all supply of bread, He had sent a man ahead of them, Joseph, who was sold as a slave. His feet were hurt with fetters; his neck was put in a collar of iron; until what he said came to pass, the word of the Lord tested him.”

Even in life’s lowest and most difficult places, God is still at work to achieve His purpose in and through our lives. The prison is certainly not a pleasant place, but it can be a very productive place where we learn life’s valuable lessons. Like Joseph, we too can prosper when we’re confined in the prison, whatever form it may take. Circumstances that confine us emotionally, spiritually, or situationally, even if we’re not behind physical bars. Joseph’s prison was indeed a prison, but yours might be of a different sort. But

no matter the circumstance, I want to show you a few ways that we can prosper when in the 'prison' places of life.

1—Learn to rest in God's PRESENCE (39:21)

“But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison.”

As they take Joseph and put him in these chains, and as they fasten the iron around his neck as the psalmist says, can you imagine what would have been going through your own mind? We might wonder if he thought, “Is this what you get for doing it right? Is this the reward for integrity? This is what I get for not giving in to temptation?” And so we wonder if obedience to God worth the fallout? Joseph knew better and he would have gladly answered in the affirmative. For it is far better to be right with God in the prison than to be out of fellowship with God in the house. Better to obey God and suffer as a consequence than it is to compromise your faith and live care free. Remember, he had made his mind up long before he ever found himself in a compromising situation. Joseph had refused Potiphar's wife and her advances on the basis of principle. At the beginning of the chapter he's a slave in the house, but he's a man of principle. Now at the end of the chapter he's shackled in the prison, and he's still a man of principle. Whether he's a steward or a prisoner, he's the same guy. He's not a chameleon, not someone with a fair weather faith, not a man who speaks out of both sides of his mouth. With Joseph, what you see is what you get. No matter the circumstances, his mind is made up. We may ask what is his secret?

Earlier in the chapter, we've come across the statement that 'the Lord was with Joseph' and gave him success in everything that he did. In spite of all that Joseph faced, God was with him both to bless and strengthen. Now, he's no longer in Potiphar's house—he's in Pharaoh's prison. It says in verse 20 that it was the very place where the king's prisoners were confined. And now once again we read the phrase, “But the Lord was with Joseph.” And that is really the secret of his prosperity. It had nothing to do with his outward circumstances and it had everything to do with the presence of God in his life. All because of God's presence with him in the prison, Joseph will not simply survive, but

he will thrive. And this was something the Lord taught the Apostle Paul. Remember what he writes in:

Philippians 4:11-13—“For I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger and abundance and need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.”

In that passage, Paul says that he had learned the secret of being content, no matter the circumstance. And then in verse 13, he openly declares that secret for us—“I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.” The secret is found only in the power of the indwelling Christ which is in operation in your life. Paul says that he was always being energized in all things by the strengthening power of the Lord Jesus. And it doesn't have anything to do with an outward set of circumstances, but has everything to do with an inward source of strength. Prosperity is not found in a place, but in a person. Jesus said:

John 15:5—“I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever abides in Me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.”

Let me tell you, it was this same power at work in Paul in Acts 16 that led the Philippian jailer to take notice of his faith. As he and Silas were praising and worshiping in the midst of their shackles, they were more content than the jailer himself so that he asked the question, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” He saw something in them that was lacking in his own heart and life. You'll never convince me otherwise.

Paul says, “I have this secret so that circumstances can never again touch me and bring me to the place of total despair.” Though it didn't come easy, he could say, “I've learned the lesson.” So many people go through life and think that if they could only relocate, they would prosper. If they could go to another church, they would prosper. Or if they could get on with some other company, they would prosper. If they could live in that neighborhood, drive that car, go to that school, they would be successful. And they go through life always wanting, never satisfied. The reason is that they haven't yet learned

the secret. Contentment is in Jesus Christ and through His power at work in you. That is the only way we can prosper in the prison.

Chuck Swindoll—*“Some people are thermometers. They merely register what is around them. If the situation is tight and pressurized, they register tension and irritability. If it’s stormy, they register worry and fear. If it’s calm, quiet, and comfortable, they register relaxation and peacefulness. Others, however, are thermostats. They regulate the atmosphere. They are the mature change agents who never let the situation dictate to them.”*

When we are in the midst of our ‘prison’ in life, whatever form that it may be, we too must learn to simply rest in the presence of God. Not just to endure the difficult season, but to experience His nearness in a way you never have before. Verse 21 says that the Lord was with Joseph in the prison, and “showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison.” Now, watch what happens. There in the most unlikely place, God raised up a friend. God gives him favor with the prison keeper of all people. God brings people into Joseph’s life that he would not otherwise have met.

You’ve seen this in your own experience—in relocating, in a change of job, in a change of school, or in a change of circumstances. There’s a lonely feeling as you’re all by yourself, as you face the fear of walking into that classroom all on your own. As everyone else talks to one another and goes about their business, there you stand with your hands in your pockets. I know what that’s like. And in the middle of that you wonder if you’ll ever have another friend again. Only to learn that God’s presence is with you, and in the most unlikely place, He makes His presence known just as He does in Joseph’s life.

2—Live with trust in God’s PROVIDENCE (39:22)

“And the keeper of the prison put Joseph in charge of all the prisoners who were in the prison. Whatever was done there, he was the one who did it.”

The presence of God is with Joseph in the prison, and the providence of God has brought him to the prison. We’ve already seen what the word ‘providence’ means. It is

to see beforehand. It means God is working in ways behind the scenes that you and I may not be able to see. God's providence will be on display in Joseph's story. Notice:

His hand directs the details

As we go back through what we've already seen these last few weeks in studying Joseph's story, we trace the hand of God in his circumstances.

- God's protective hand has been keeping him
- God's providing hand has been supplying him
- God's prospering hand has been blessing him
- God's providential hand has been moving him

Romans 8:28—“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose.”

Now, it is one thing to hold to the truth of that verse when you can see its truth. But it is another thing to hold to it as you find yourself in the midst of the prison. The test is not so much when the sun is shining, but when the clouds are threatening. Will you believe it when the wheels fall off and you're in the absolute pits? All things work together for the good of them that love God. The NIV says it this way, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.” It is not that all things are working, but that in all things God is working. Things don't work—things happen. But God works in things. And He does this for the good of those who love Him. Not just in the sunshine, not just in the success, not just in the victory, but in the prison. And indeed, if it doesn't work in the prison, then it doesn't work at all. Joseph was in prison by the providence of God, and the success he finds there is not the result of his own ability or cleverness. It is the Lord who causes him to prosper. He understands that he was to do everything in his power to the glory of God, but is God who will ultimately bring the blessing.

Psalms 23:6—“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.”

In Hebrew, the verb 'follow' means to pursue or chase after something. It is like that line from the song we like to sing, "Your goodness is running after, running after me!" That is the goodness of God, and we see it in the life of Joseph. God's mercy followed him, pursued him, chased after him wherever he went. Friend, you can't outrun the mercy of God. And who knows how His mercy is constantly being shown in our lives both in visible and invisible ways? Like the old gospel song says:

*There is a hand, unseen by me,
That leads through ways I cannot see;
While going through this world of woe,
This hand still leads me as I go.*

*I'm trusting in the unseen hand
That guides me through this weary land;
And some sweet day I'll reach that strand,
Still guided by the unseen hand.*

Wherever we are in life, we can know that not only is He there with us, but that He is surrounding our lives with His mercy and goodness. His hand is directing the details. But that's not all. Notice how:

His grace defies the facts

What are the facts? Joseph is a slave. Joseph has been falsely accused. Joseph is a prisoner. Strictly from man's perspective, his situation is hopeless. He might as well get used to prison life because he's going to be stuck here for the rest of his life. That's what the facts say. But the grace of God will turn the facts of the situation on their head. God's unmerited favor overrules the facts!

As far as your own life is concerned, what are the facts? It may be that you've hit rock bottom. Like the prodigal son, you've taken all that the Father has given you and wasted it on living for yourself. The wages of sin has taken its toll out on you. Friend, never forget that God's grace defies the facts! Though your sins be as scarlet, they will be as white as snow. Though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. The

grace of God rescues the helpless from their helplessness. Where sin did abound, grace did much more abound.

3—Look in faith to God’s PURPOSE (39:23)

“The keeper of the prison paid no attention to anything that was in Joseph’s charge, because the Lord was with him. And whatever he did, the Lord made it succeed.”

As those who trust in Jesus, you and I must always look in faith to the purpose of God. We rest in the fact that God is indeed working in our circumstances, for we are those who have been called according to His purpose. God’s purpose in the prisons of life—those seasons of hardship—is often refining, something He uses for our preparation. God was with Joseph, providentially He was involved in the details, and the prison will be a place where God will prepare him for future service. His prison experience was a necessary part of his training to one day fulfill a central role in God’s purposes for His people and for the world. And in our own lives, let me give you four ways He may be working, some ways in which He uses life’s prison experiences:

To test our faith

I know you’ve heard this, but faith that is not tested cannot be trusted. The prison often proves whether our devotion is based on God’s blessings or on God Himself. Like the devil who tried to accuse Job of serving God for gain:

Job 1:8-11 — “And the Lord said to Satan, ‘Have you considered My servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?’ Then Satan answered the Lord and said, ‘Does Job fear God for no reason? Have You not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out Your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse You to Your face.’”

Sometimes God allows us to enter the prison if for no other reason to prove to the devil that God is worthy of worship, even in the midst of suffering. Joseph remained faithful

in the prison, even when forgotten, all because his faith was rooted in God, not circumstances.

To shape our character

In the prison, God often does in us what He cannot do in moments of ease. He builds strength and endurance in us through hardship. He's refining our character, developing in us patience, humility, endurance, and integrity. Listen:

Romans 5:3-4—“We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.”

James 1:2-4—“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”

Joseph is being prepared for leadership through suffering, and God will use difficulty to mold and shape us into the people He desires us to be. The psalmist wrote, “Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word” (Ps. 119:67).

To prepare us for greater service

God uses the prison seasons to prepare us for the calling ahead. Joseph's time in the prison wasn't wasted—it was training ground for governing Egypt. He's received some invaluable experience in Potiphar's house and now in the prison. These seasons equip us for ministry, leadership, or influence previously we were not yet ready to handle. We are constantly being entrusted with experience.

To teach us to rely on Him

Prisons strip away self-sufficiency. In confinement, we are forced to trust God deeply, lean on His promises, and learn dependence on His presence and provision. Paul often wrote about his hardships. Listen to his perspective:

2 Corinthians 1:8-9—“For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.”

When we rely on God’s strength and remain faithful in the dark prison cell, God gets the glory. Our prison becomes a platform for His power and goodness. Others then see the hope, joy, and peace we have despite trials, and it is a powerful testimony.

Matthew 5:16—“Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”

God’s purpose in the prisons of life is not to punish, but to prepare us, to purify us, and to position us all for His glory and our good. What feels like confinement may actually be the very context where God is doing His deepest and most transformative work in our lives. Friend, it was true for Joseph, and it will also be true for you and me.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (1918–2008) was a Russian novelist who became one of the most influential voices exposing the brutality of the Soviet system, especially its prison camp system known as the Gulag. He fought for the Red Army in WWII, but was arrested in 1945 for criticizing Joseph Stalin in a private letter. He was sentenced to eight years in a labor camp, followed by exile, an experience that profoundly shaped his life. Before his arrest, he didn’t have faith and was influenced by communist ideas that often rejected religion. But during his years in the prison camp, he began to think about life, suffering, and truth. It was in that experience that he began to search for meaning and found faith in Jesus Christ. He wrote about it in his book, *The Gulag Archipelago*:

“In the intoxication of youthful successes I had felt myself to be infallible, and I was therefore cruel. In the excess of power I was a murderer, and an oppressor. In my most evil moments I was convinced that I was doing good, and I was well supplied with systematic arguments. And it was only when I lay there on rotting prison straw that I sensed within myself the first stirrings of good. Gradually, it was shown to me that the

line separating good and evil passes not through states, not between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart—and through all human hearts...So, bless you, prison, for having been in my life.”

When you get to the point where you can say, “Bless you, prison, for having been in my life,” it is evidence that God’s presence, providence, and purpose has become very real to you, and not just theory. That’s why He allows so many difficult experiences to come our way in life, friends. It is not because He is unloving, but because He is loving, and desires for us to truly know how wonderful He is. In Philippians 3, Paul said that his pursuit in life was to know Christ and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings. To share in Jesus’ sufferings is to identify with Him in rejection, trials, and hardship, and especially those that come as a result of following Him. Just as Jesus was mistreated and persecuted, those who walk close with Him will experience the same. It is not something to avoid, but a privilege! It has a sanctifying power—so that as believers suffer for Christ or with Christ, we become more like Him. It is in this sense that God uses prisons in our lives. If this life included nothing but sunshine, the world would be a desert. For without the rain, hope’s flowers would not blossom.

Romans 8:18—“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”

Don’t waste your ‘prison’ experience. Learn to rest in the presence of God. Live with trust in the providence of God. Look in faith to the purpose of God. And if you are not saved, may the ‘prison’ be a place that brings you to Jesus who will set you free. He suffered and died for your sins on the cross, paid the debt in full, and His resurrection life can be yours. Will you invite Him in?