

What Do You Do When Life Becomes A Prison? Genesis 39-41

Robben Island consists of 3 square miles of wind-swept land off the coast of South Africa. For centuries, it served as a leper colony and a prison. For a while, it was home for one of the most famous prisoners in history, Nelson Mandela. He supported the abolishment of apartheid. Apartheid was a system of racial segregation designed to extend the privileges of a white minority and diminish the rights of people of color. 11% of the population controlled the rest of the population. Under apartheid, black people were excluded from whites-only beaches, whites-only buses, and whites-only hospitals. Black people were not allowed to vote or run for office. Apartheid legalized racism. Nelson was the best candidate to lead the opposition to apartheid. He was the descendant of royalty, and his mother was a staunch Christian. He was educated at the finest schools and became a lawyer. In the 1950's, he became a force to be dealt with, and on August 15, 1952, he was arrested and convicted of treason and sentenced to 27 years in prison. He wondered how a season ever made things better. He wondered if he would ever get through what he was going through. He overcame his imprisonment, negotiated the abolishment of Apartheid, and became a national hero.

Joseph's life is a fabulous study of overcoming challenges and becoming a hero. Challenges and trials come to all of us because we live in a fallen world, but Joseph's were unusually heavy. He is sold into slavery by his brothers to become the most pivotal person of his generation. Through Joseph, we learn about the goodness of God even through the badness of life in a fallen world. The triumph of the story reminds us all that God is sufficient for whatever comes our way in the course of this life.

We pick up Joseph's story, no longer in a pit, but now in prison in Egypt. The three things that Joseph teaches us to do while we're in prison are: Work. Wait. Worship. You may not be in prison, but you may be infertile and inactive. In limbo. In between jobs. In between relationships. Insecure with your future. In search of stability.

The movements of his life may be best described by the four coats he wears.

Coat 1: A Richly Ornamented Coat (Overcoming Betrayal)

“Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made an ornate robe for him.” Genesis 37:3,23

By showing favoritism, Jacob sent the wrong message to both Joseph and his brothers. The tension created a relational powder keg, resulting in resentment and hatred. Joseph had received a set of dreams predicting his future rise to greatness, but he did not stop to understand their importance. In his multicolored coat, he flaunted these dreams before his brothers, already seething with hatred. Joseph's actions were insensitive, immature, and lacking in discernment. The brothers' anger finally vented.

“So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe—the ornate robe he was wearing—and they took him and threw him into the cistern. The cistern was empty; there was no water in it.” Genesis 37:23-24

One of the brothers, Reuben, attempted to intervene. Then, in rapid succession, the following actions took place by Joseph's brothers:

- They took the coat from Joseph – the symbol of their hatred.

- They threw him into a deep cistern to be out of sight.
- They enjoyed a meal while Joseph suffered alone in the pit.
- They sold him into Ishmaelite slavery to make a profit on his life.
- They smeared the blood of a goat upon the coat to deceive their father.

Joseph seems to be the only one not described in the text as troubled.

1. While You're Working, God Is Blessing.

“Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. And Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him down there. The Lord was with Joseph, and he was a successful man, and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian. And his master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord made all he did to prosper in his hand. Joseph found favor in his eyes and became his attendant. Potiphar put him in charge of his household, and he entrusted to his care everything he owned. From the time he put him in charge of his household and of all that he owned, the Lord blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph. The blessing of the Lord was on everything Potiphar had, both in the house and in the field. So Potiphar left everything he had in Joseph’s care; with Joseph in charge, he did not concern himself with anything except the food he ate.” Genesis 39:2-3

Takes 5 minutes to read Genesis 37—Joseph is in the pit for most of it. So Joseph was taken down to Egypt (that takes 3 seconds to read, but it’s 450 miles Beersheba to Thebes.) It was probably about a 40-day walk. A day on the auction block had to feel like an eternity. He spent 10 years, a full decade, in Potiphar’s house. Nothing happens fast in Joseph’s story.

Coat 2: A Servant’s Coat (Overcoming Temptation)

Soon Joseph was going to be challenged with success and the temptations it brings. Genesis 39 continues the story of Joseph’s life with a twist that only a master narrator could produce. Joseph, through a series of slave sales, became the property of Potiphar, a captain of Pharaoh’s guard in Egypt. Potiphar was wealthy enough to have many slaves and servants in his charge. It is here that Joseph would learn to be a loyal servant-leader. It was in the household of Potiphar that Joseph put on his second coat – a servant’s coat. Joseph distinguished himself in skill and ability, but those qualities were not the true keys to his life. God’s presence with him, and that was the real difference. *“The Lord was with Joseph”* Genesis 39:2. Five times we read the phrase *“Joseph was successful”* Genesis 39:2,3,5,6,23

Joseph must have been afraid and unsure of his future. The pain of being torn from his family and sold into slavery by his own brothers was difficult to endure. It would have been so easy to become bitter and hate-filled, but that did not happen with Joseph. Although far from home, a very real presence of God sustained him. Joseph was placed in a position of overseer of Potiphar’s household. The fact that an Egyptian pagan would recognize and admire Joseph’s character and credit it to Joseph’s God was remarkable indeed.

Potiphar made him the supervisor of all of the other servants as well as the handler of all public relations. He was placed in charge of Potiphar’s finances and was responsible for all provisions for the household. God knew these skills would be needed later. For about ten years, everything Joseph touched was blessed. He was “on top of the world” with his position of success – also more vulnerable to temptation. The text said Joseph was *“well built and handsome”* and at the prime of his life at age 27 when *“his master’s wife took notice of Joseph”* Genesis 39:6-7.

“And after a while his master’s wife took notice of Joseph and said, ‘Come to bed with me!’” Genesis 39:6-7

Joseph refused her advances. These convictions were learned from God, not from home.

- He was concerned ethically that his actions would hurt others. He was concerned spiritually and recognized all sin is against God Genesis 39:8-9.
- He had the right approach. He avoided contact with her. Genesis 39:10
- He had the right escape plan. Run as far and as fast as possible (Genesis 39:12) It should be noted that Joseph left his coat (the second coat) in her hand.

The fury of this woman scorned was disastrous for Joseph. Her passions exploded in anger, resulting in a strategy of her own – anger:

- She lied about Joseph’s intentions to the men of the household. Genesis 39:13-15
- She lied about Joseph’s intentions to her husband Potiphar. Genesis 39:16-18
- Joseph was imprisoned undeservedly. Genesis 39:19-20

Joseph ended up in prison for doing the right thing. Life often isn’t fair. Joseph again found himself comforted by the presence of God. *“The Lord was with him, and He showed him kindness”*- even while in prison. Genesis 39:21-23

Genesis 39 ends the way it began - with Joseph in prison. Joseph has been learning from the trials, problems, dangers, and pains of this life. His character was being shaped by adversity, punishment by men, and by the hand of a merciful God. Through it all, his faith in God’s control was helping him overcome. Joseph wore his second coat well!

“And he sent a man before them—Joseph, sold as a slave. They bruised his feet with shackles, his neck was put in irons, till what he foretold came to pass, till the word of the LORD proved him true.” Psalm 105:17

Some translate that, “it put his soul in irons.”

“But while Joseph was there in the prison, the LORD was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden. So the warden put Joseph in charge of all those held in the prison, and he was made responsible for all that was done there. The warden paid no attention to anything under Joseph’s care, because the LORD was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did.” Genesis 39:20-23

The Lord was with him in his incarceration. The Lord was with him down in prison.

He made the most of his time in the prison. He befriended the warden and interpreted dreams for the baker and butler. He gave the bad news to the baker and good news to the butler. Joseph asked him to remember him, but he forgets him. A day passed. A week passed, a month passed, a year passed, and then two long years passed. Joseph was forgotten.

“The chief cupbearer, however, did not remember Joseph; he forgot him.” Genesis 40:23

2. While You’re Waiting, God Is Working.

The end of chapter 40 to the beginning of chapter 41 is about as wide as a ribbon and takes a millisecond to read, but it takes two years of time. 24 months of silence. 104 weeks of waiting. 730 days of wondering. 2,190

meals all alone. 12,360 hours of listening for God and nothing in response. God's waiting room. Waiting for deliverance. Waiting for rescue. Waiting for an answer.

We assume that if we are not working, no one is working, and that is not true.

Jesus said to them, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working." John 5:16

When you come to the end of Genesis chapter 40, Joseph is in prison, but God is at work.

God places the butler near the pharaoh. He gives Pharaoh dreams. God confuses the Pharaoh's counselors so they can't give an answer and conditions Joseph's heart to interpret the dream.

"Quovar" means "to bind together." The other meaning is "to look eagerly, see with hope, to believe, a confident expectation."

The Greek word is "Prosdecomai" and it means "to wait forward, lean it toward something." It's like when you're sitting on the edge of your seat or standing on your tiptoes. Simeon waited for Jesus. "He was upright and devout, and he looked forward to Jesus' coming." To wait is to lean forward, to wait in expectation. To wait is not to fret. It is not to worry. It's not even to take control. Abandon worry and live in constant expectation.

"Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him; do not fret when people succeed in their ways, when they carry out their wicked schemes." Psalm 37:7

"Be still and know that I am God." Psalm 46:10

We can rest because God is God. God is always at work.

Moses answered the people, "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still." Exodus 14:13-14

They didn't know his hand was already below the Red Sea ready to part the waters.

"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." Romans 8:28

Trust that everything will work out according to God's will.

"And it came to pass"—Joseph's struggle didn't come to last. This too will pass.

"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 40:31

3. While You're Worshipping, God Is Praised.

Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I had a dream, and no one can interpret it. But I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it."

"I cannot do it," Joseph replied to Pharaoh, "but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires." Genesis 41:16

Joseph did not come out of prison bitter at God. He came out of prison bragging on God.