

Text: Genesis 41:37-57

Title: "God's Providence Calls us to Faithful Thankfulness"

Time: July 26, 2009 am

Place: NBBC

Introduction: In his homiletical suggestions for the passage we read together this morning, the German Lutheran commentator Leupold suggests as a sermon title "Successfully Encountering Prosperity." He notes that from a spiritual perspective, coping with prosperity is often more difficult than coping with adversity.

I listened to a message this past week that was preached by the 19th century British Baptist preacher, C.H. Spurgeon, remembered today as the prince of preachers, that was entitled "As Thy Days, So Shall Thy Strength Be." In that message Spurgeon said this about the relation between adversity and prosperity in our lives:

"Never should I have considered the heavens the work of thy fingers, O my God, if thou hadst not first covered the sun with a thick mantle of darkness: the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained, had never been bright in mine eyes, if thou hadst not hidden the light of the sun and bidden him retire within the curtains of the west. Night seems to be the great friend of the stars: they must be all unseen by eyes of men, were they not set in the foil of darkness."

Spurgeon's point is that the dark times often help us to appreciate God's blessings on our lives in much the same way that the darkness of night helps us to appreciate the glimmer of the stars. Adversity can be a key to properly seeing and appreciating the blessings God has given to us.

In this chapter the providence of God takes Joseph from the bottom of the dungeon to the top of the palace. Whereas up to this point, God's plan had cast Joseph continually down lower

into darkness, now it brings him quickly up. As we have watched Joseph on the downward path since chapter 37, we have learned together that everything Joseph experienced was a part of God's plan, the eternal God who sees the end from the beginning, and the personal friend who was with Joseph every day in the prison. This is His work of providence.

God's plan for Joseph called for a response from him. We have seen that submission, surrender, purity, patience, and wisdom are all important responses to God's work of providence in our lives. Now as things turn around for Joseph, I believe that we need to see especially that God's providential work in our lives also calls us to faithful thankfulness.

Being thankful is a lot like star gazing. Sometimes we need the darkness to really see the blessings of God. Joseph's thankfulness came from an ability to see his blessings in stark relief from the difficulties he had experienced, and he expresses this thankfulness especially in the way he names his sons (vv. 51-52).

This morning I want us to see five blessings of God's plan for Joseph, which Joseph thanked God for, as one whose dark experiences had given him a great ability to see God's blessings.

I. Joseph was thankful for the testimony God gave him before a lost world (vv. 37-39, 45 [Joseph's new name]).

Illustration: Do you remember the selection of Saul, the son of Kish, as the first king of Israel? Saul was a head taller in stature than anyone in Israel, and about a head shorter in courage. When Saul first heard the news that God had selected him he responded, "Am I not a Benjamite, of the smallest of the tribes of Israel, and my family the least of all the families of the tribe of Benjamin? Why then do you speak to me in this way?" (1 Sam. 9:21).

The Spirit of the Lord came upon Saul to equip him for the task God had called him to, and yet on coronation day he was discovered hiding in the baggage of all those who had traveled a long way to crown him king. He did not want the job of the anointed of the Lord; he wanted instead to simply blend in as a nobody from the tribe of Benjamin.

Application: There is a difference between cowardice and humility. Saul demonstrates cowardice, but Joseph possessed true humility. When we are indwelt by the Spirit of God as Saul and Joseph were, and have faith to understand the Bible and to know God personally, we are called to have a testimony that must do more than hide by fitting in with the world around us. In order to be known to be what we truly are, what God's Spirit has made us, we need to be willing to stick out, to step forward, to take the responsibility that comes with having the testimony of someone who is spiritually alive in a spiritually dead world.

Never mistake cowardice for humility. The Saul who hid in the baggage was a coward, not a humble man. The David who fought Goliath for the glory of God was a humble man. Joseph was a humble man who was thankful for the prominent testimony God gave him before a lost world. He was not ashamed of the Spirit of God within.

Are you thankful for the fact that God has made you His witness in a lost world, or are you doing everything you can to conceal this identity of yours? This concealment is not humility; it is cowardice.

II. Joseph was thankful for the responsibilities God gave in a lost world (vv. 40-44, 47-49).

Illustration: In the Spurgeon sermon I mentioned earlier, the preacher mentions that our duties are a cause of our need for God's strength:

“The Lord has spoken to you, and he has said, ‘Son of man, run, and do such and such a thing which I bid thee’; and you have gone to do it, but as you have been upon your way, a sense of great responsibility has bowed you down, and you have been ready to turn back even at the outset, and to cry, ‘Send by whomsoever thou wilt send, but not by me.’ Reinforced by strength, you have gone to the duty, but while performing it, you have at times felt your hands hanging exceedingly heavy, and you have had to look up many a time and cry, ‘O Lord, give me more strength, for without thy strength this work must be unaccomplished; I cannot perform it myself.’ And when the work has been done, and you have looked back upon it you have either been filled with amazement that it should have been done at all by so poor and weak a worm as yourself, or else you have been overcome with horror because you have been afraid the work was marred, like the vessel on the potter’s wheel, by reason of your own want of skillfulness.”

Application: Our responsibilities are often more a cause of our anxiety and distress than they are a cause of a sense of thankfulness in us. But we need to learn to see our responsibilities in relation to God’s work of providence. We need to see that the things we must do as our duty are a part of God’s plan for us.

The text Spurgeon used in his message gives us a great promise, as we think of our responsibilities as the gifts and calling of God’s plan for our lives: “As thy days, so shall thy strength be” (Deut. 33:25). Other appropriate passages are 1 Thess. 5:24, “Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass”; and Phil. 4:13, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” Learn to be thankful for your duties while viewing them as an important part of the blessing of God’s plan for your life. He is with you as you faithfully perform your duty; He will strengthen you; He will bring it to pass.

III. Joseph was thankful for the home God gave him in a lost world (vv. 45, 50-52).

Application: Did you notice that the home Joseph came from was part of the trouble that God had helped Joseph to forget? (v. 51). It is a sad thing when a home is a source of trouble that the Lord must help a child forget.

Joseph's response to God's plan meant that his kids were going to grow up in a better home than he did. Perhaps you come from a home that did some kind of spiritual damage to you, but that is not an excuse for failing to have a godly home of your own. Joseph establishes a godly home in a pagan land, with a wife who was probably not a believer at first—he had no choice here. God can do the same for us no matter our background.

Our families should be a cause for thankfulness, not a cause for anxiety and pain. Every time we go to visit relatives, Maureen and I are told by gasping relatives about how quickly our kids are growing up. They are growing up quickly. Empty nesters often tell us how fast these years of child raising went for them. Sometimes the days seem very long as parents, but they are actually fleeting very quickly away. We need to make the most of these precious years together, and thankfulness for the homes that God has given to us as part of His plan for us is critical to doing so.

IV. Joseph was thankful for the freedom God gave him in a lost world (vv. 45b-46).

Illustration: Last month I took a trip to Pittsburgh and then to Cleveland and then came home again. Last April I took my family down to South Carolina and back. We are hosting friends who are here to help us with VBS who have come up from South Carolina for a week. We “go forth” all over this great land of ours and think nothing of it.

Application: Our text tells us twice that Joseph went forth over the land of Egypt. Why the emphasis? Well, traveling around in Egypt was something that Joseph had not been able to do for a while as a prisoner. Free travel is just another blessing of our political freedom that you and I take for granted. There is nothing like a loss of freedom to remind a person how precious freedom is.

Illustration: The freedoms we enjoy in this country have never been free. We are praying for Matt Katka and his family as Matt recovers from his injuries. People are in harm's way this morning so that we can travel safely and freely around this great land and worship in the way we are worshipping this morning.

Perhaps no one ever communicated the great cost of freedom better than did Patrick Henry in his 1775 speech at St. John's Church in Virginia. Henry said in part, "If we wish to be free — if we mean to preserve inviolate those inestimable privileges for which we have been so long contending — if we mean not basely to abandon the noble struggle in which we have been so long engaged, and which we have pledged ourselves never to abandon, until the glorious object of our contest shall be obtained — we must fight! — I repeat it, sir, we must fight! An appeal to arms and to the God of hosts is all that is left us!"

Henry's conclusions encapsulated one of the convictions that has made our nation great: "Why stand we here idle? What is it that gentlemen wish? What would they have? Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!"

That is not a cry we hear much from politicians today. We hear "give me health care" and "give me a bail out" and "give me a job." "Give me freedom" simply no longer has the currency in our culture that it once did, and this is why America

is not as great as she once was. We need to be thankful for freedom and remember the great cost that continues to be paid by patriots to win it for us. Let's fight and pray for it; not take it for granted, neglect it, or trade it in for some government program promised by a politician.

V. Joseph was thankful for the successes God gave him in a lost world (vv. 53-57).

Application: That phrase, "just as Joseph had said," indicates that Joseph was in line to receive a lot of credit for the success of the grain storage program that he had instituted. Millions of lives were saved because Joseph was successful.

But there was Someone who said before Joseph said. Had God never said that the famine was coming, Joseph could have never said so. Joseph never forgot that the God of providence was responsible for the successes of his life (41:16). He remained thankful.

When success comes to the man who believes in the providence of God, he knows that God did it. God desires to use us in ways that will do tremendous good in the world in which we live, but we need to learn the importance of Joseph's phrase, "It is not me." God deserves glory from a thankful people.

Conclusion: And so the providence of God takes a turn in our passage for Joseph. Dark days have become much brighter, and Joseph remained thankful. Undoubtedly, it was his ability to remember the dark days that made him thankful for the blessings of God's providential plan for him when things got better.

Few of us know what it is to be betrayed by our brothers, enslaved, slandered by the adulterous wife of our boss, or forgotten in prison. Instead, we have family who love us, live as

freemen, are given credit as moral upstanding citizens, and visit prisons only to do ministry. We are blessed beyond measure with material blessings. I dare say that with all our modern luxuries, technologies, conveniences, and delicacies, none of us would trade places with Joseph even at the pinnacle of his good days in Egypt.

But do we know how thankful we should be for these kind providences of the Lord upon us? May we be thankful for our testimony opportunities, our responsibilities, our homes, our freedoms, and our successes, because every single one has been a part of God's loving and gracious plan for us.

“A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction—the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*