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God's Tests

By David Servant

FOURTEEN

Joseph's Journey

In this and the next few chapters, we'll continue studying some well-known Bible characters whom the Lord tested. Specifically, we'll pay attention to how God tested them in order "to do good to [them] in the end," to borrow Moses' words (Deut. 8:16). God planned a divine destiny for each one to fulfill, just as He has a divine destiny planned for you to fulfill. All of them, however, fulfilled their destinies only after first being tested. It won't be any different in that respect for you and me.

Joseph, whose story covers 11 chapters in the book of Genesis, is first on our list. I suspect you are familiar with his story, but did you know Scripture states that God tested him?

And He [God] called for a famine upon the land; He broke the whole staff of bread. He sent a man before them, Joseph, who was sold as a slave. They afflicted his feet with fetters; he himself was laid in irons; until the time that his word came to pass, *the word of the Lord tested him* (Ps. 105:16-19, emphasis added).

As a teenager, Joseph was given a glimpse of his future by means of two divinely-given dreams. They foretold of a time when his brothers and father would bow before him. Even so, Joseph's divine destiny far exceeded anything that he ever anticipated because of his dreams. God chose to exalt him to preserve the lives of many people, including those of his own family so that the promised seed of Abraham, the Savior, might one day be born on the earth. Beyond that, Joseph would unknowingly prefigure that future Savior, paralleling Jesus' story in amazing ways, offering further proof to all sincere seekers that Jesus is truly the Messiah.

Humiliation Before Exaltation

From reading his story, we know that it was Joseph's destiny to become prime minister over all of Egypt, the world's super-power at the time. None of us, however, would have ever suspected the means that God would use to exalt him to that high position. Often,

God's way up is first down. Joseph's descent began soon after he was born. Because he was his father's favored son, his brothers hated him, and they hated him even more when he innocently shared his prophetic dreams. They eventually sold him to a band of Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver, and Joseph found himself in fetters and on his way to Egypt. Hardly sounds like the road to regal rulership!

It wasn't God, of course, who motivated Joseph's brothers to treat him so cruelly, but there is no doubt that He permitted them to do so. The Lord would use it for good in two ways. First, Joseph would be geographically located in the country in which God would exalt him. Second, God would use Joseph's sufferings to mold him, preparing him to be a leader and savior.

Joseph was no superman, and I can't imagine that he didn't become bitter towards his brothers—as anyone in his shoes would have. I also can't imagine that he didn't question God as to why He allowed his brothers to get away with their dastardly deed. Eventually, however, he gained victory over any bitterness as he began to realize God's sovereign hand at work in all his circumstances. I suspect that when he did, he wished he would have simply trusted from the start that the Lord was “causing all things to work together for good” (Rom. 8:28).

Chances are, you can relate to Joseph—you've had people selfishly use you, damage your reputation, or stab you in the back. Has it made you bitter or better? (I once heard it said that the difference between bitter and better is the letter “I.”)

Let's learn from Joseph. Never lose sight of the fact that whatever happened to you could never have happened if God hadn't permitted it. And don't forget that He loves you dearly. If you love Him, He promised to cause all things to work together for your good (see Rom. 8:28), just as he did for Joseph. So you can, by faith, rejoice.

Before and as God's plan unfolds, you should imitate Him, showing mercy to those who have mistreated you. You can pray for them as Jesus commanded (Luke 6:28), and if God brings them to repentance as He did in the case of Joseph's brothers, you can then forgive them, just as God forgives those who repent. Mercy keeps the door of forgiveness open to all offenders, but repentance is required for offenders to walk through that door to realize reconciliation. It was not until Joseph's brothers repented that he forgave them and they were reconciled.

May I also suggest that you make certain you have a valid complaint against someone before you classify that person as an offender. The truth may not be what you think. You may have initially offended your offender. That's one reason Jesus told us to confront any offending brothers privately (see Matt. 18:15).

Tests Two and Three

In Egypt, Joseph was purchased by an officer named Potiphar and became his slave. That was Joseph's next test. Would he abandon his faith in God? Or would he trust that Potiphar was God's ordained authority over him whom he should faithfully serve? Joseph chose the latter.

I wonder, however, how many of us have found ourselves in somewhat similar circumstances as did Joseph, but have never passed that particular test, chafing under some God-ordained authority.

God is looking for people who are willing to be servants at the bottom (see Luke 22:26). Those who are unwilling disqualify themselves to be leaders. How can God entrust us with much if we haven't been found faithful with little? Joseph certainly passed his second test.

He was faithful to Potiphar as his slave, and Potiphar entrusted him with all his household, recognizing God's blessing upon him. *God blesses those who serve.*

Soon, however, there was a dramatic turn of events and yet another test for Joseph. Potiphar's wife, bitter at Joseph for resisting her sexual advances, falsely accused him before her husband, and he had Joseph thrown into prison. I'm sure he was tempted to complain to the Lord, "So this is what I get for obeying You? If I would have committed adultery, I would still be working for Potiphar!"

There is no biblical record of Joseph's griping, however. Rather, he was once again found faithful even in prison, and the chief jailer soon put him in charge of all the other prisoners. You just can't keep a good man down!

Again, God did not orchestrate all those difficulties in Joseph's life, nor did He inspire anyone to mistreat him. Yet He did permit Joseph's circumstances and used them all for good.

Again may I ask, how many of us have found ourselves in circumstances beyond our control, but instead of remaining faithful and trusting God, have complained and lost faith? How many potential Josephs are reading this right now who have stalled their spiritual progress by allowing circumstances to push them away from God rather than draw them nearer? If that sounds like you, you can follow Joseph's example, pass your test, and watch your circumstances ultimately change.

Test Four

Joseph faced yet another major test when he interpreted the dream of Pharaoh's incarcerated chief cupbearer and requested him to entreat Pharaoh on his behalf. Once that cupbearer was restored to his position as Joseph had foretold him, he forgot about Joseph. As a result, Joseph spent two more full years in prison. Think about that. Two more years!

Surely Joseph was tempted to harbor bitterness toward that cupbearer, and surely he was tempted to question God: "Why did You supernaturally help the cupbearer to be released from prison and not me? Why did you give me revelation about his immediate future but not my own immediate future?"

I'm sure you know the end of the story. God eventually gave Pharaoh a dream that Joseph interpreted, and he was consequently exalted to prime minister over Egypt. How old was Joseph when he first caught a glimpse of his divine destiny? Around age seventeen. How old was he when he was exalted in Egypt? Thirty (see Gen. 41:46).

Joseph's journey from slave to prime minister took thirteen years, and another seven years would pass before his brothers arrived from Canaan wanting to buy grain. *Joseph's first divinely-granted dream of his brothers bowing before him was fulfilled twenty years after the dream.* Two years later, his second dream was fulfilled when his father arrived in Egypt.

The Proper Perspective

At age 49 Joseph was again approached by his brothers who, after the death of their father Jacob, were afraid that he would take revenge against them for their past misdeeds. Joseph's classic response is an inspiration:

Do not be afraid, for am I in God's place? And as for you, you meant evil against me, *but God meant it for good* in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive (Gen. 50:19-20, emphasis added).

Earlier he had told his brothers: “It was not you who sent me here, but God” (Gen. 45:8). That’s grace!

Joseph knew God didn’t inspire his brothers to mistreat him, but he recognized God’s sovereign hand in his life. God had permitted it all for a divine purpose.

Like Joseph, the Lord has a unique role for you to fill in His divine plan, “good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them” (Eph. 2:10). He wants all of us to mature unto the full stature of Christ and find our special function in the body of Christ. God is working to that end. Are you cooperating?

One of the Bible’s Most Precious Promises

Let me close this chapter by making one more mention of the promise, “God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (Rom. 8:28).

It is unfortunate that some (whom I’ve earlier labeled the “hyper-sovereignists”) have taken this scripture to the extreme by saying that God *causes* all things, which it doesn’t say.

It is just as unfortunate that others (whom I’ve earlier labeled the “non-sovereignists”) have reacted against the hyper-sovereignistic view with another extreme opinion on this wonderful promise. Some of them, trying to wriggle out of the clear meaning of this verse, have devised a strained interpretation, claiming that it is speaking solely about intercessory prayer.

If we take Romans 8:28 in its full context, however, it obviously has application to much more than intercession. I encourage you to read the eleven verses preceding Romans 8:28 and the eleven verses following it in order to see what I mean.

For example, verses 17 and 18 state:

And if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, *if indeed we suffer with Him* in order that we may also be glorified with Him. For I consider that *the sufferings of this present time* are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us (Rom. 8:17-18, emphasis added).

Let’s also read verses 33 through 39:

Who will bring a charge against God’s elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? *Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?* Just as it is written, “For Thy sake we are being put to death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered.” But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:33-39, emphasis added).

Within the context, what did Paul mean when he said, “God causes all things to work together for good”? He meant just what he said—God causes all things to work together for good, even things that don’t seem to be good, such as hardships, suffering and persecutions.

Even when we are “slaughtered like sheep,” we “overwhelmingly conquer,” as we immediately find ourselves in God’s presence.

Notice that the promise doesn’t say that God *causes* all things, or that all things are good. The devil and his people cause many things, and many things are not good. God does, however, cause all things to work together for good, that is, for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose.

Once we believe that amazing promise, life takes on a whole new dimension. Circumstances are no longer just circumstantial—they are God-granted opportunities to grow spiritually. Adversities are no longer just adversities—they are opportunities to trust God’s Word and believe in His goodness. When you can see God’s sovereign hand working for your ultimate good, life becomes an adventure.