

## Rising Above the Pits of Prison Genesis 39:21-23

Please take your Bibles and turn with me to our text found in **Genesis 39:21-23**. Stand to honor God's Word and let's read our passage aloud.

**“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.”**

A young man applied for a job as a farmhand. When the farmer asked for his qualifications, the young man said, “I can sleep when the wind blows.” The farmer was puzzled by the comment, but he liked the young man, so he hired him. A few days later, the farmer and his wife were awakened in the night by a violent storm.

They quickly began to check things out to see if everything was secure. They found that the shutters on the farmhouse had all been fastened. There was a good supply of logs next to the fireplace. They inspected the property and found that the farm tools had all been placed in the storage shed. The tractor had been moved into the garage. The barn was properly locked. Even the animals were calm. All was well as the farmhand slept soundly.

The farmer then understood the meaning of the young man's words “I can sleep soundly when the wind blows.” Because the farmhand faithfully did his work when the skies were clear, he was prepared for the storm when it broke. So when the wind blew, he was not afraid and could sleep in peace.

Joseph could rest easy as the sun set on each day because he had been faithful.

He was a faithful son in the home of his father Jacob in the land of Canaan.

He was a faithful slave in the home of his master Potiphar in the land of Egypt.

We found last week that the Lord blessed Joseph in

everything he did. When he was sold into slavery by his brothers, he didn't wallow in the mire of self-pity, but obediently and with great care performed his duties with a godly character that was noticed by Potiphar. Rising through the ranks past the other slaves, he became the personal attendant to Potiphar. But he also caught the promiscuous eye of Potiphar's wife who relentlessly pressured Joseph to engage in an immoral act. Joseph's moral integrity stood steadfast against the onslaught of temptation choosing to obey God rather than to give in, even though he could just as easily rationalize such activity. He knew God was faithful to him so he stood faithful to God and opposed her seductive requests.

Last week I gave you five key points to help against temptation.

Remember God is with you.

Refuse to give in.

Run away when necessary.

Request God's help through prayer.

Respond with the Word of God.

Joseph once again found himself in a pit. This wasn't a dirt pit like in Dothan, but the pit of a prison. Let me remind you of an important life lesson learned in the pit of a German concentration camp through the words of Betsie ten Boom **“there is no pit so deep, that God isn't deeper still.”**

No matter how low your circumstances may bring you, God is with you in your pit of despair. As we saw last week, God was with Joseph. I encouraged you to write your name in the place of Joseph and remember that truth because God doesn't lie. God hadn't abandoned Joseph when he crossed into Egypt, when he was sold to Potiphar, when he was tempted by Potiphar's wife and we learn again today that God didn't abandon him in prison.

No matter what pit you are in, this principle is always true: **“For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. You will seek Me and find Me when you seek Me with all**

**your heart. I will be found by you,' declares the Lord." Jeremiah 29:11-14**

I believe Joseph understood that principle and believed it. It's what kept him going when the going got tough. It motivated him to live a life of integrity. And now he has found himself tossed out of the frying pan and into the fire. But as we have seen so far, so it is evident here where we notice Joseph's providential care while in prison.

## **I. JOSEPH'S PROVIDENTIAL CARE WHILE IN PRISON – v. 21**

The Apostle Paul reminds us of a very important principle that is intricately woven throughout the pages of Scripture. We call it the principle of God's sovereignty. That simply means God is in control. **Romans 11:33-36a "Oh, the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out! 'Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been His counselor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay Him?' For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things."**

If we left it there everyone of us at one time or another would rightly question the motive or purpose of God in some of the things that happen to us. It is important to remember that God's ways are not our ways and neither are His thoughts our thoughts. As Paul states, God's judgments are unsearchable and His ways past finding out. We will never comprehend why He allows the things He does in our lives that don't make sense, except to realize that they are for our good and His glory, that they are meant to grow our faith and in the middle of it all, give Him praise. Sometimes only after the fact or at the end of our lives do we see the why behind it. So how very important to finish **verse 36** which says **"To Him be the glory forever! Amen."** which segues nicely into **chapter 12:1-2: "Therefore" or since or because God has it all planned out, "I urge you, brothers (sisters, believers), in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship. Do**

**not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – His good, pleasing and perfect will."**

Our response to God's sovereignty over us is to give our lives as a living, holy sacrifice that pleases Him or simply put to live a godly life no matter what's happening – the good, the bad and the ugly. Such a godly life doesn't become molded by the values of the world because it has been transformed through the renewing of our mind by the Word of God so that we can then test what God's will is good, pleasing and perfect. If His plan is the pits for us, then it's His perfect plan for us and along with Job we can say that **"the hand of the Lord has done this."** (Job 12:9)

I recently read this story in the devotional book Streams in the Desert. Many years ago the most magnificent diamond in the history of the world was found in an African mine. It was presented to the king of England to adorn his crown of state. He sent it to Amsterdam to be cut by an expert stonecutter. The stonecutter took the priceless gem and cut a notch in the diamond and with a single, powerful blow of his hammer struck the diamond which fell in two pieces into his hand.

We might question the wisdom of the stonecutter, even think that the diamond was ruined. But that's not the case at all. For many days the stonecutter studied and planned that single blow. He viewed its qualities and defects and every possible line. That blow was not a mistake. The blow that seemed to ruin the splendor of the gem actually enhanced its beauty. Only with the skilled eye and hand of the stonecutter could he bring out the two gems that were hidden in the rough.

The author writes: "Sometimes, in the same way, God lets a stinging blow fall on your life. You bleed, feeling the pain, and your soul cries out in agony. At first you think the blow is an appalling mistake. But it is not, for you are the most precious jewel in the world to God. And He is the most skilled stonecutter in the universe. Someday you are

to be a jewel in the crown of the King. As you lie in His hand now, He knows just how to deal with you. Not one blow will be permitted to fall on your apprehensive soul except what the love of God allows. And you may be assured that from the depths of the experience, you will see untold blessings, and spiritual enrichment you have never before imagined.”

The Divine Stonecutter, God, is at work in Joseph, fashioning every facet of his life to bring glory to Him and to develop Joseph into the person God wanted him to be. It was no mistake and he had to learn that **“the hand of the Lord has done this.”**

In a book written by George MacDonald, two characters are in conversation when one questions why God made him, not seeing any purpose in it. The other responded by saying “Perhaps you don’t see any purpose yet, but then, He isn’t finished making you. And besides, you are arguing with the process.”

Not a single blow can hit,  
Till the God of love sees fit.

God’s hammer had once again fallen on the life of Joseph to shape him into a beautiful gem. **“While Joseph was in prison, the Lord was with him,”** Notice two results. First, God shows His kindness to Joseph.

#### A. God Shows His Kindness to Joseph

**“But while Joseph was there in the prison, the Lord was with him; He showed him kindness.”** Your translation might read that **“God showed him mercy.”**

It can be translated as gracious or compassionate toward others and is a chief character trait of God.

According to the Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament “the verb (in the Hebrew) depicts a heartfelt response by someone who has something to give to one who has a need... it is an action from a superior to an inferior who has no real claim for gracious treatment.”

One of the great examples in the Old Testament of God’s mercy is found in **Exodus 32-34**. Israel had been miraculously delivered from Egypt through a series of 10 plagues. They were on foot headed to the Promised Land when they arrived at Mt. Sinai. Moses went up the mountain to talk with God and receive the 10 commandments. It was a covenant made between God and the people. Moses was up there a long time and the people figured something had gone wrong so they asked Aaron to make them an idol of the god who brought them out of Egypt. Aaron complied and crafted a golden calf and the people all bowed down and worshipped the calf with a big party thus breaking the covenant, the penalty of which was death. God was angry because of their sin and was ready to wipe them all out and make Moses into a new nation when Moses intervened on their behalf. It’s at this point that Moses makes a request of God to see His glory. That’s when God reveals to Moses five of His attributes: **Exodus 34:6 “The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.”**

**Verse 7** reveals how those attributes are displayed, evident in how God deals with people through His forgiveness of sin.

Now Joseph hadn’t done anything deserving of slavery or prison, but that is where we find him. Once he had been a favored son.

Then he had been a favored slave.

The next thing he knows, the clang of prison bars slams behind him. We aren’t given any details about what prison was like in those days, but we are given a clue from the psalmist of what Joseph experienced. **“He (God) sent a man before them – Joseph, sold as a slave. They bruised his feet with shackles, his neck was put in irons.” (Psalm 105:17-18)**

Having his feet shackled and his neck in irons sounds like pretty rough treatment.

Joseph is in prison, but even there God showed him kindness. No matter where we find ourselves, if we are in the place where God wants us to be, God will show His mercy or compassion to us.

**How does He show Joseph kindness?** I'm so glad you asked, because we see it when God sends His favor through the warden.

## B. God Sends His Favor Through the Warden

**“But while Joseph was there in the prison, the Lord was with him; He...granted him favor in the eyes of the warden.”**

I take that to mean that God made it so the warden would take notice of Joseph. He wasn't just prisoner XYZ in cell block F. The word favor can also be translated grace. We think of it as God giving us what we don't deserve.

In the case of Joseph, he was a prisoner and didn't deserve any special treatment, but the warden treated him with kind regard, good will and approval because of what he saw in Joseph.

I'd like to think that as the jailer got to know Joseph better, hearing his story and watching his conduct and character in person, he probably began to realize that Joseph had been wrongly imprisoned. He was a model prisoner in spite of his incarceration. The warden took notice and made a decision. In **verse 22** we see Joseph's positional charge while in prison.

## II. JOSEPH'S POSITIONAL CHARGE WHILE IN PRISON – v. 22

**“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.”**

Joseph was given two responsibilities. First was his oversight of the prisoners.

### A. His Oversight Of The Prisoners

**“So the warden put Joseph in charge of all those held in the prison.”**

No matter who it was and no matter what they had done, Joseph was in charge of them.

I was going through my desk the other day and came across a little booklet How to Work With

Difficult People. It's sub-title says Without Becoming Difficult Yourself.

Think about what kind of people Joseph may have had to deal with as I read the opening paragraph. **“Do you have to spend time with someone who constantly provokes your spirit? Someone who gets himself into trouble and then wonders why he is treated unfairly? Does this individual ask for counsel and then argues with you when you give it? Have you ever been talking to someone about their problems and wonder how to start helping them? It seems like their problems resemble a plate of spaghetti, all tangled up and with many loose ends.”**

The author, Dr. Charles Brown, then suggests **II Timothy 2:19-26** as a way to handle difficult people. He offers this advice from the Latin phrase *Idiorum Non Carborundum*, “don't let the idiots grind you down.”

He proposes some solutions from the passage on how to handle difficult people by first noting that it starts with you. You are to recognize that God brought this person in your life to further develop some godly trait to help you grow in grace.

**Do you think Joseph had some difficult people to deal with in prison?**

**Do you think he will have some difficult people to deal with once he becomes overseer of Egypt?**

Maybe Dale Carnegie took a page out of Joseph's example before he wrote his book on How to Win Friends and Influence People. Joseph was given the oversight of every prisoner in the King's prison. I'd like to think that he showed the same kindness to all the prisoners that God had shown him. I'd also like to think that under his leadership the mood of the prison was transformed or reformed.

By the way, this is a good place to put a plug in to pray for Forgotten Man Ministries and their work in the jails around the state.

But it wasn't just the oversight of the prisoners that Joseph was responsible for, he also had oversight of their production within the prison.

## B. His Oversight Of Their Production

I brought this wall display to show you this morning. There is a smaller version of it hanging on the missionary map in the back. This one was given to me many, many years ago as a gift. While working in HR I was helping with recruiting to fill a biomed position. A recent doctoral graduate from China had applied for the position. I had to work with the company's lawyer to get her student visa changed to a work visa so she could take the job. Before she started working for the company, she took a trip back to China to visit her family and upon returning presented me with this beautiful wall decoration out of her gratitude. As I understand, it symbolizes the Chinese New Year and I think for her, a new opportunity.

After several months it took on new and valued meaning. I was reading in the *Voice of Martyrs* magazine a story about imprisoned believers in China and saw a picture of one of these in the article. It said that each day the prisoners have a quota of these to make that are then sold in the marketplace as souvenirs. Before they can sleep at night, they are required to meet their quota. So, this hangs in my office as a reminder of what believers in prison endure there in China.

As a fun exercise in Adult Impact, I asked them to consider what kinds of work the prisoners might have done.

You have, perhaps, been driving along US23 and seen a prison work detail out picking up trash along the highway.

Michigan prisons used to make license plates. A practice that was stopped in the 1950's was the prison chain gang. They would take prisoners out all chained together and work a farm or do work on a road because of public demand for improved transportation. They also worked on government projects. They have made mattresses, shelving, bookcases and desks.

It's hard to imagine what kinds of things they did in prison back then, but Joseph was responsible for

everything that was done in the prison by the prisoners. Maybe they had prison work details cleaning up around the pyramids or built retaining walls along the Nile River. Maybe they were responsible to grow their own food. Whatever it was he had the oversight.

We saw in **verse 21** Joseph's providential care while in prison. God showed Joseph His kindness and God sent Joseph favor through the warden.

Then we saw in **verse 22** Joseph's positional charge while in prison. Joseph had oversight of the prisoners and oversight of their production.

In **verse 23** we see that Joseph's prosperity continues while in prison.

## III. JOSEPH'S PROSPERITY CONTINUES WHILE IN PRISON – v. 23

**“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.”**

Your Bible might read prosperity instead of success. I think it would be one thing to be a slave and quite another to be a prisoner. I think being in prison it would be easy to cop an attitude and just not care, especially when wrongfully accused. If you have a bad attitude, what are they going to do, throw you in jail? You're already there, maybe put you in solitary confinement for a while to give you an attitude adjustment. But Joseph had a different spirit because the Lord was with him. His attitude was different from the rest of the prisoners. He did everything with the right attitude and with excellence and he was rewarded by being put in charge of everything in prison. First, we notice that his attributes are appreciated by the warden.

### A. His Attributes Are Appreciated By The Warden

**“The warden paid no attention to anything under Joseph's care.”** Why? **“Because the Lord was with Him.”**

We talked a bit about having a great work ethic last week. When you remember the Lord is with you, you will do everything the best you can. Imagine being given a responsibility of tremendous importance but not having a helicopter boss, one who hovers over you all the time to make sure the work is done and done right. The warden did not supervise anything Joseph did because the Lord was with him. He had complete confidence and trust in Joseph's character and ability.

He didn't have to worry about a thing.

He didn't have to check up on him.

He didn't need to have him do it again.

The prison warden saw the same character traits in Joseph that Potiphar saw and just as with Potiphar, the warden rewarded Joseph with a position of responsibility.

**Kent Hughes provides some insight that would be good for us to noodle ourselves. "The key to our day-to-day success in this life is living in the reality that God is with us."**

We looked at that promise last week. At Christmas we talk about Emmanuel – God with us and we understand the promise that in His going away for a while, the Holy Spirit was sent to be with us all the time. As we think about His presence with us, it should be evident in our relationship with Him so that others see it and appreciate our godly character.

**Why was the Lord with Joseph? Chuck Swindoll offers that "First and foremost in his life was his vital and consistent relationship with his Lord."**

There is one more thing that was evident because the Lord was with him. His achievements are ascribed by the Lord.

## **B. His Achievements Are Ascribed By God**

Because the Lord was with Joseph, ***He*** (and I emphasize that it was God) gave him success in whatever he did. Your translation may say that he prospered. It's the same word used in **Joshua 1:8** **"This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth, but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do**

**according to all that is written therein; for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success."**

**Psalm 1:2-3 "But his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in His law doth he meditate day and night. And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth its fruit in its season; its leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper."**

I hope you see the parallels between these verses and Joseph's life. God never forgot about Joseph and consequently Joseph never forgot about God. I think he thought about God and God's promises passed on by his parents. He meditated on it day and night. That resulted in observing or doing the Word and will of God that resulted in prosperity. Let's keep in mind that success or prosperity in God's mind is different than the success the world has in mind. In the case of **Joshua 1:8**, the success God had in mind was conquering the land which was the will of God and it would only come if Israel kept God's law in mind and observed it. That doesn't mean just look at it, but to keep it, obey it.

Going back to what Kent Hughes said, **"the key to our day-to-day success in this life is living in the reality that God is with us"** and as important as that is we must also remember that it is coupled with the meditation on and obedience to God's Word.

**Joshua 1:8** stresses the importance of speaking the Word daily, something Israel was commanded in **Deuteronomy 6:6-7** **"These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up."**

Keil and Delitzsch note that meditation on God's Word is not the same as the theoretical speculation of the Pharisees, but a practical study of it for the express purpose of observing it in our thoughts and activities. The command is to speak it with the mouth, think about it by meditating on it and then act on it by doing everything according to it.

From the 19<sup>th</sup> century comes the words of Alexander MacLaren who notes that “obedience is the absolute acceptance of and unhesitating, swift, complete, uncomplaining obedience to everything that is discerned to be God’s will and our duty.” He calls God’s Word our marching orders. But he goes on to add this sobering even stinging thought: “I am afraid that the practice of such meditation as is meant here has come to be, like the act of making ecclesiastical stained glass, almost extinct in modern times. You have all so many newspapers and magazines to read that the Bible has a chance of being shoved out of sight, except on Sundays and in chapel.” That comes from a man living in the 1800’s. **What would he think or say now when in the US alone we have over 7,000 magazine titles and approximately 1,300 daily papers?**

Although Joseph had no written law of God on paper, he had the law of God written on his heart, taught in some degree by his parents to love God and obey and do everything he could to please him and as a result he would prosper. According to **Joshua 1:8** and **Psalms 1:2-3**, prosperity is predicated on the meditation of and obedience to God’s Word. Joseph had a lot of time to think about it and act on it and it was evident in his life that God was with him because if you meditate on God’s Word your actions will be godly and his God controlled activities prospered. That was Joseph.

Please don’t think for a moment that I am suggesting that if you meditate on God’s Word then your work or your personal portfolio will prosper. If that is God’s will for your life, then it will be so. What I am saying is that because Joseph was where God wanted him to be and he was obedient to live godly in even his difficult circumstances, God prospered him for the very purpose that we will see in the ensuing chapters. It was all divinely choreographed. The key to when prosperity would occur is evident in **Psalms 1:3** where we read that the fruit yielded comes in its season and not sooner.

There is a phrase that could be applied to Joseph’s life and it is this: “bloom where you’re planted.” Don’t wait for your situation to somehow get better

before you put forth any effort. Dig in and do well right where you are. Joseph could have been in prison the rest of his life and that wouldn’t have altered his character or his actions because regardless of his circumstances he knew God was him and he sought to please God.

According to the Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament “real prosperity results from the work of God in the life of one who seeks God with all his heart.”

We read in **II Chronicles 31:21** about Hezekiah **“In everything that he undertook in the service of God’s temple and in obedience to the law and the commands, he sought his God and worked wholeheartedly. And so he prospered.”**

Just a few chapters earlier we read about King Uzziah that **“as long as he sought the Lord, God have him success.” (II Chronicles 26:5)**

Success isn’t measured by what the world thinks but by what God approves and it begins with seeking Him with all your heart.

So let me ask in closing: **what about Joseph’s example challenges you?**

We can learn a lot by his godly character and his great work ethic in spite of the life challenges he faced.