

## **Transformed Characters** **A Turning Point for Joseph – The Wait in Prison** **Gen 39-40**

At the end of Genesis 37, Joseph's story had taken a turn for the worse. Overnight, Joseph, the favourite son had turned into a slave. Ripped from under the shelter of his loving and protective father and tossed into the hands of strangers, his life was turned upside down. The self-confident and arrogant Joseph now finds himself with no freedom and no control over his life. With so much uncertainty looming ahead, Joseph must have felt for the first time an overwhelming sense of insecurity and fear like he had never experienced before. And perhaps for the first time in his life, he truly learned to pray and to turn to God. God's work of transformation in Joseph's life had begun. Yet it would take another 13 years for God to bring Joseph to a turning point of total surrender to God and trust in His sovereignty over all circumstances and timing. Joseph needed to come to the end of his own strength before he could fulfil the destiny God had for him.

### **The Blessings**

The story picks up in Genesis 39 with Joseph arriving in Egypt. God had preserved Joseph's life from his murderous brothers and He used the Ishmaelite traders to move him into the land where he would fulfil God's plans. Potiphar, a high-ranking officer of Pharaoh, bought him over from the hands of the Ishmaelite traders. Despite being a slave, Joseph flourished in Potiphar's house. He was made the overseer over Potiphar's household. Repeatedly, we are told that the Lord was with him (Gen 39: 2, 3, 21, 23) and that he was prosperous (Gen 39: 2, 3, 23). God granted Joseph success and the people around him could see that. R.T. Kendall believes that it was perhaps to encourage Joseph that God so manifestly blessed him, lest the trial became too unbearable. For in time to come, Joseph's life would take yet another downward spiral. But for now, God showed in no uncertain terms that He had not abandoned Joseph and that Yahweh, the God of the covenant was with him and blessing him.

### **The Testing**

While living in Potiphar's house, Joseph had the full trust of his master Potiphar and the teenage Joseph matured into a well-built and handsome man. This attracted the uninvited attention of Potiphar's wife who would make brazen proposals to Joseph to lie with her. It was a temptation that Joseph faced, not just once or twice, but day after day.

God's blessings did not exempt Joseph from trials and testing; these were part of the refining process for Joseph. Will the person God has chosen stand the test as a man of integrity and trustworthiness? We see that Joseph passed with flying colours! He conducted himself uprightly. Joseph feared and honoured God. Perhaps at this point, we fully expect Joseph to be rewarded, for his obedience and commitment.

Yet, it was not so and events took a horribly unjust turn. Joseph was falsely accused of wrongdoings he never committed and was swiftly thrown into prison. As Joyce Baldwin puts it, "For the second time Joseph became the victim of other people's spite."

We can imagine how much Joseph must have wanted vindication from all the wrongs

which were done to him. Surely, things needed to be set right! But more than personal vindication, what Joseph needed was to surrender to God's justice and God's plans.

### **The Wait**

In prison, we are told once again that the Lord was with Joseph (Gen 39:21, 23) and granted him success (Gen 29:23). We are not told how long Joseph was in prison before the king's butler and baker were also put in the same prison, and Joseph was made their personal attendant (Gen 40:4). When they each had a dream, Joseph offered them the interpretation from God and he was spot on. Imagine his excitement! He must have thought, "This is my chance! I have put in my request to the butler and I have even explained my innocence. Surely the time has come for me to be released from prison. The butler will champion my cause, and the time is now!" And then imagine his disappointment when days turned into weeks but still, the butler didn't return for him. The party was over. Was he going to be stuck in that prison forever? R. T. Kendall writes,

*"One of the chief things that Joseph had to learn was to wait for God's time to come. Joseph correctly interpreted the butler's dream, and he knew it. And as soon as he interpreted the dream he said, "You are going to be restored to your former position, you are going to get out of this dungeon. Remember me, Joseph – Joseph – you won't forget me, will you?" He couldn't resist getting himself into the act. God looked down from heaven about that time and probably said, "Ahem. My instrument Joseph needs a little more refining. I think two more years in the dungeon might do." God wanted to turn Joseph the manipulator into Joseph the man."*

A full two years would pass before God's time would come for Joseph (Gen 41:1). We will see later that the butler will in fact be instrumental in Joseph's release (Gen 41: 9-13). However, God will be the One to bring about the event. Joseph will one day be remembered and his gifts fully used, but at this point Joseph has to learn to surrender to God's timing and God's ways.

When we go through tough times, we may have many questions. Why did it happen? Why did God allow this? Where is God? Why doesn't God answer my prayers? Yet, it is often in our lowest moments, when God seems silent that He is quietly doing the deepest work of transformation in us, so that when we emerge from the experience, we are no longer the same person that we started out as.

### Sources:

Victor P. Hamilton, *Genesis*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990).

John E. Hartley, *Genesis*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000).

R.T. Kendall, *God Meant It For Good* (Wilkesboro, NC: Morningstar, 1986).

Gordon Wenham, *Genesis*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Nelson, 1987).

Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Authentic* (Chariot Victor Publishing, 1997).

## **Questions for Cell Discussion**

### **Question 1**

Observe and describe the circumstances Joseph found himself in from Gen 39:1-6 (sold into slavery) and Gen 39:20 – 40:4 (thrown into prison).

How did God use the adverse circumstances of Joseph's initial captivity and subsequent imprisonment for the greater good (Rom 8:28)? Are prosperity and success reliable indicators of God's blessing and approval?

### **Question 2**

Observe what happened in Gen 39:7-18. How was Joseph able to resist the temptation of Potiphar's wife day after day?

Joseph did the right thing but was falsely accused and thrown into prison. How did Joseph respond? How would you have responded if you were in Joseph's situation?

### **Question 3**

Read Gen 40:23 – 41:1. How long did Joseph have to wait before he was released from slavery and prison? In addition to going through adverse circumstances, what test did God put Joseph through?

### **Question 4**

God used adversity and waiting to test and transform Joseph – cultivating surrender, trust and patience in his life. Are there areas in your life that you need to surrender to God? What are the obstacles that may be hindering you from putting your faith or trust in God fully? Share with and pray for one another.

