

FROM PRISON TO PROMINENCE

by Steve Zeisler

Christians are certain of the outcome of all the events of world history: God will vindicate the righteous; establish his rule; heal every hurt; and he himself will be the center of everything. There is a limerick that reminds us of the biblical witness that all of history will end to God's glory:

*The world had a hopeful beginning,
But we ruined our chances by sinning.
We know that the story
will end to God's glory;
But at present the other side's winning.*

If we are honest, we must admit that most of the time it seems evil is triumphant. An honest assessment of our world, therefore, can be a chastening thing. But we can live with that, because we know with absolute certainty the end of all things.

I would like you to imagine that I am a war correspondent and that I am about to interview each of you individually. I will be asking you for your impressions of life from your battle station as a spiritual warrior. It is a time of struggle. Difficult choices must be made. Righteous decisions must be arrived at. You are expected to maintain your place in the spiritual battle lines where God has placed you to serve him with honesty and courage. How is the battle going for you as we await the end of all things?

In our studies in Genesis last week we looked at the matter of sexual temptation involving two individuals who were fighting a "hot" war, if you will. They were confronted with seductive, alluring opportunities to sin. One succumbed and was shamed, while the other made the righteous choice to flee the temptation. For some of you, that may be the area where you are facing temptation now. You know that God is calling you to stand firm and resist.

Others of you are involved in a "cold" war. You are fighting to trust the Lord in the midst of loneliness and rejection. Perhaps you feel you have been used by others. You may feel that you are the only one left on the battlefield. Fighting a cold war can be a very lonely experience. As a war correspondent, I will be asking you what it feels like to stand alone, seemingly without support. Cold war soldiers must often face all kinds of injustices without a word of explanation. There are no reasons given you for why these things happen to you. Yet your instructions are the same as the instructions for your counterpart in the "hot" war: you must trust the Lord in the midst of your trial.

Once again we turn to the story of Joseph in the book of Genesis. We have already seen how this multi-talented young man, his father's favorite son, was so hated by his brothers that they vowed to get rid of him. They threw him into a pit while they debated what to do with him. Some passing traders found him and sold him into slavery in Egypt, where he eventually became overseer of Potiphar's household. The wife of this Egyptian officer of Pharaoh's court attempted to seduce Joseph but he resisted her. She, however, accused him before her husband and Joseph was thrown into jail. That is where we find him in our study today. He is alone, rejected and misused. He is very much a cold war spiritual warrior. There, in prison, unjustly accused, is where Joseph has been called to serve God and to trust him.

In Genesis 40 we discover that two other important figures are also lodged in the same prison as Joseph. One is the cupbearer of Pharaoh, while the other is his baker. While these would hardly be considered high positions in

government today, back then these were very important posts. These men were advisers, really, to the Pharaoh. They had been accused of a crime, and were sitting in prison awaiting judgment. Each has a troubling dream and each tells Joseph about it. Joseph offers, as God's servant, to interpret their dreams. To the cupbearer he says, "Within three days Pharaoh will restore you to your office"; while to the baker he says, "Within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head from you and will hang you on a tree." When three days have gone by, exactly what Joseph foretold came to pass.

I want to look at two verses in particular in Gen.40. First, in verse 8 we notice a change in Joseph's attitude from the days of his youthful arrogance.

Then they said to him, "We have had a dream and there is no one to interpret it." Then Joseph said to them, "Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell it to me, please."

Joseph has become increasingly aware of the power and the presence of God in his life. We can see that in his responses. When he faced temptation by the wife of Potiphar, Joseph said, "I may not sin against God." When he was asked to help interpret the dreams of the officials of Pharaoh's court, Joseph replied, "The interpretation of dreams belongs to God." When Pharaoh himself later asks Joseph to help interpret his dream, Joseph reacts almost in fear that he will be given credit. "No," he cries, "Interpretation of dreams belongs to God alone." He refuses to take credit for things he once would have pridefully attributed to his own considerable talents. He has become less impressed with himself and much more aware of God's working in his life. His responses which I have quoted demonstrate that he has become a humble man who depended upon God, not himself.

The second verse which I want to highlight is the word in Gen.40:23. Joseph had asked the cupbearer to remember him when he was restored to his place in Pharaoh's household, but that did not happen:

Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him.

Once again, life seems to be treating Joseph unfairly. He had been rejected by his brothers, unjustly imprisoned, and forgotten by an official of Pharaoh's court whom he had helped. How he must have wondered what possible good could come of all this injustice. Yet we find that he is increasingly becoming a man of faith.

As I studied this passage last week, I was reminded of Corrie Ten Boom's wonderful book *The Hiding Place*. Corrie Ten Boom was imprisoned by the Nazis during the Second World War for her work in helping Jews escape the hands of the Gestapo. Her darkest days were spent in Ravensbruck prison. Here is what she wrote in her book describing her situation:

Barracks 8 was in the quarantine compound. Next to us—perhaps as a deliberate warning to newcomers—were located the punishment barracks. From there, all day long and often into the night, came the sounds of hell itself. They were not the sounds of anger, or of any human emotion, but a cruelty altogether detached: blows landing in regular rhythm, screams keeping pace. We would stand in our ten-deep ranks, with our hands trembling at our sides, longing to jam them against our ears to make the sounds stop. The instant of dismissal, we would mob the doors of Barracks 8, stepping on each others' heels in our eagerness to get inside, to shrink the world back to understandable proportions. It grew harder and harder. Even within these four walls there was too much misery, too much seemingly pointless suffering. Every day something else failed to make sense; something else grew too heavy. "Will you carry this too, Lord Jesus?"

Unjust suffering, loneliness, despair, anguish—is that your spiritual calling? Are you a cold war warrior? Are you trusting the Lord amidst the trials? I am reminded of the prayer requests printed every week in our church bulletin. Will you carry these too, Lord Jesus? Here is one that says, "I ask for prayer for my son Paul and his wife, separated after only four years of marriage." Here is another: "After 15 years of marriage, my wife suddenly decided to divorce me. My 14-year-old son lives with me. Please pray she will find it in her heart to forgive the past and start afresh." Another requests prayer for a communication problem between a husband and wife of 40 years. "He will not talk to her," it says. Prayer is also requested for a woman with cancer. She recently lost her

baby through sudden infant death syndrome. Will you carry these too, Lord Jesus?

In light of these situations, Joseph's being unjustly imprisoned and forgotten, Corrie Ten Boom's anguish and fear in a Nazi prison, and our own people who are suffering the trials described in our prayer sheet, I believe there are three categories of pain highlighted by Joseph's story which we would do well to look at. The first is rejection. Have you ever faced rejection by someone you love? Have you been denied and frozen out by people you care about? Joseph's brothers abandoned him. As we have just heard, there are some in our own congregation whose marriages are tragically short on communication. Parents have been rejected by their children; they want nothing to do with their value system. The pain of rejection is passed down through the generations. Joseph was cut off from the people he loved and sent away to slavery in Egypt.

Another circumstance which caused Joseph to suffer was that he was used by others. It seems the world is filled with people who use others. For the handful of givers around, there seems to be a mob of users ready to exploit them. You find them in the work-place, ready to take advantage of those who are willing to give their all. There also seems to be a mere handful of nurturers—those who raise children, volunteer for Sunday School classes, etc.—but a whole group of others ready to take advantage of them. Joseph was used by Potiphar to make money for him; and he was the target of Potiphar's wife, who wanted to use him sexually. Later Joseph was used again by Potiphar. He threw him into prison in order to placate his wife, although the Egyptian very likely knew that Joseph's account of what had occurred was trustworthy. But a slave has no rights, so he was used once again.

Have you ever been taken advantage of? Perhaps it was in a romantic situation, or at work? Are you a compassionate person who has been used by uncaring people? It's such a painful thing to suddenly discover that the person you were helping has no interest in you whatever. You've been used; you've been had. Joseph had ample time in prison to remember his rejection by his brothers and his being used by the family who purchased him.

Thirdly, Joseph suffered because he was a forgotten man. That may be the most painful circumstance of all. Joseph befriended his fellow-prisoner, offered him a word of hope from the God of hope, and yet that was all forgotten. How many men and women languish in prisons today, forgotten people? No one visits them or writes to them; no one cares for them or remembers them. They are the offscourings of the earth; forgotten and abandoned. At a luncheon in church recently for seniors who need special care—those who need walkers or wheelchairs—I was struck by how very limited these people are. These people have very little access to normal, everyday communication with the world. Some are forgotten and abandoned by the world. With the exception of a quarterly luncheon like the one we had last week, very little attention is paid to people like these. They are forgotten. That was Joseph's experience in the prison in Egypt. "Will you carry this too, Lord Jesus?" Believers who have been rejected, used and forgotten often ask Corrie Ten Boom's question: "Will you carry this too, Lord Jesus?" Here is what she wrote after she asked that question of God:

But as the rest of the world grew stranger, one thing became increasingly clear. And that was the reason the two of us [she and her sister] were here. Why others should suffer we were not shown. As for us, from morning until lights-out, whenever we were not in ranks for roll call, our Bible was at the center of an ever-widening circle of help and hope. Like waifs clustered around a blazing fire, we gathered about it, holding out our hearts to its light and warmth. The blacker the night around us grew, the brighter and truer and more beautiful burned the word of God. "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us." I would look about as Betsie read, watching the light leap from face to face. More than conquerors... It was not a wish. It was fact. We knew it... We were more than conquerors. Not "we shall be." We are! Life in Ravensbruck took place on two separate levels, mutually impossible. One, the observable, external life grew every day more horrible. The other, the life we lived with God, grew daily better, truth upon truth, glory upon glory.

What a remarkable story! Joseph, too, could tell of the richness of the presence of God. It is the testimony of men and women of every generation who have been called to fight a cold war. There is no place, however remote or

frightening, that He does not accompany us. He will supply what we need, no matter where we find ourselves.

A second great source of encouragement for Joseph in his cold war was that he knew what the future held for him. His first defense against despair was God's presence in his life; his second line of defense was that he knew his destiny was not to languish in prison for the remainder of his life. He knew it because of a dream he had when he was a young man. In that dream he saw the sun, the moon and the stars bow down to him. God was declaring to him in a personal way that his story would have a glorious ending. The final chapter would not find him discarded and forgotten, lying in prison. Rather he would be exalted by God and given a task to complete.

You and I have been told the same thing. The end of our story does not spell rejection, or injustice, or being used and then discarded. We will not ultimately be forgotten, lonely and rejected. The end of our story is glorification in Jesus Christ. That is our destiny if we are his children. However painful our present circumstances, we need to recall that the Lord is headed someplace with us. He has been raised from the dead, and his word is true. Although he was forgotten, rejected and misused, Joseph knew two things for sure: God was present with him and he would not fail him; and he had not yet seen written the final chapter of his story.

In Genesis 41 we will see how the elevation to prominence predicted in his dream became a reality for Joseph.

Now it happened at the end of two full years that Pharaoh had a dream, and behold, he was standing by the Nile. And lo, from the Nile there came up seven cows, sleek and fat; and they grazed in the marsh grass. Then behold, seven other cows came up after them from the Nile, ugly and gaunt, and they stood by the other cows on the bank of the Nile. And the ugly and gaunt cows ate up the seven sleek and fat cows. Then Pharaoh awoke. And he fell asleep and dreamed a second time; and behold, seven ears of grain came up on a single stalk, plump and good. Then behold, seven ears, thin and scorched by the east wind, sprouted up after them. And the thin ears swallowed up the seven plump and fat ears. Then Pharaoh awoke; and behold, it was a dream. Now it came about in the morning that his spirit was troubled, so he sent and called for all the magicians of Egypt, and all its wise men. And Pharaoh told them his dreams, but there was no one who could interpret them to Pharaoh. Then the chief cupbearer spoke to Pharaoh, saying, "I would make mention today of my own offenses. Pharaoh was furious with his servants, and he put me in confinement in the house of the captain of the bodyguard, both me and the chief baker. And we had a dream on the same night, he and I; each of us dreamed according to the interpretation of his own dream. Now a Hebrew youth was with us there, a servant of the captain of the bodyguard, and we related them to him; and he interpreted our dreams for us. To each one he interpreted according to his own dream. And it came about that just as he interpreted for us, so it happened; he restored me in my office, but he hanged him."

Pharaoh then summoned Joseph and related his dreams to him. We pick up the story again in Gen.41:25:

Now Joseph said to Pharaoh, "Pharaoh's dreams are one and the same; God has told to Pharaoh what He is about to do. The seven good cows are seven years; and the seven good ears are seven years; the dreams are one and the same. And the seven lean and ugly cows that came up after them are seven years, and the seven thin ears scorched by the east wind shall be seven years of famine. It is as I have spoken to Pharaoh: God has spoken to Pharaoh what He is about to do. Behold seven years of great abundance are coming in all the land of Egypt; and after them seven years of famine will come, and all the abundance will be forgotten in the land of Egypt; and the famine will ravage the land. So the abundance will be unknown in the land because of that subsequent famine; for it will be very severe. Now as for the repeating of the dream to Pharaoh twice, it means that the matter is determined by God, and God will quickly bring it about. And now let Pharaoh look for a man discerning and wise, and set him over the land of Egypt. Let Pharaoh take action to appoint overseers in charge of the land, and let him exact a fifth of the produce of the land of Egypt in the seven years of abundance. Then let them gather all the food of these good years that are coming, and store up the grain for food in the cities under Pharaoh's authority; and let them guard it. And let the food become as a reserve for the land for the seven years of famine which will occur in the land of Egypt, so that the land may not perish during the famine."

Pharaoh's cupbearer finally remembers Joseph, and as a result Joseph is called into Pharaoh's presence to interpret

his dream. Typically, Joseph not only interprets the dream, but also offers a solution to the problem posed by the dream. He is not pushing himself for the position he suggests the Pharaoh create. He offers a solution because it is obvious to him what should be done given the circumstances. Having agreed to the suggestions of the 30-year-old Hebrew slave-prisoner of Potiphar, it dawned upon Pharaoh that there was no one better equipped to oversee Joseph's suggestions than Joseph himself. Pharaoh chose him to occupy the second-highest position in all the Egyptian empire; and told him to put in place the program that would save the nation.

Why do you think Joseph had to spend thirteen years as a slave and later a prisoner? We are not always given insight into the reasons behind our suffering, but we sometimes are. We can make a stab at what was happening in Joseph's life during those years. The Lord knew that his people must leave Canaan because of the seductiveness of Canaanite religion and culture. In order to become a nation, his chosen needed to spend time among the Egyptians, a people who would not integrate with them. God also knew that the world needed to be protected from the coming famine, and so he sent Joseph on a 13-year humility lesson. At 17, Joseph was so impressed with himself that he could not possibly have handled being elevated to the second highest position in the land. He could not for a moment have handled the power and the glory that would be his the moment Pharaoh chose him to become his right-hand man. Joseph needed some correction before he could be entrusted with so much. In prison he learned that no matter how talented he was, that was no guarantee for success in life; that whatever he had that was worthwhile was given him by gift of God. He learned to trust God in the hard, dark, frightening days he spent in prison. That was where he learned maturity. In prison he discovered how to handle the prominence and power that would one day be his.

It is worth noting that Scripture is silent on any act of vengeance by Joseph on those who had mistreated him. When he finally came face to face with his brothers, he treated them severely but lovingly. As second-in-command of all of Egypt, of course, he could have dealt with them harshly. There is no record that he repaid Potiphar and his wife in kind for what they had done to him. He did not throw them down from their positions. There is no record that he repaid the cupbearer for his forgetfulness and ingratitude. There is not a word of Joseph's repaying others for their misdeeds. That is because Joseph saw the hand of God at work in his life all during the cold war he was called upon to partake in. Through suffering, he became competent to handle the great responsibilities that would later be his.

The apostle Peter writes, "Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety upon Him because He cares for you." God knows exactly when we are ready to be used by him. We assume too much of ourselves; that we can withstand more than we can; that we are ready to make hard choices when we are yet unprepared. Let us humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God so that in the proper time he may give us the position we now long to have.

Last week I heard about yet another prominent Christian evangelical who has had to quit his ministry because of sexual misconduct. As I thought about that situation, together with all of the revelations that are coming out daily it seems, it struck me that the last thing I ever want to do is to elevate myself (or anybody else) to a position I can't handle yet. Prominence and power carry with them many more temptations to sin than do lowly and humble tasks. Peter's reminder is timely: in due time God will exalt you. We need to be wary of assuming we are ready to handle that which we are not yet ready for. Let us learn from the life of Joseph. He had to learn so much before he was ready to take on the task for which God had called him.

Finally, it is remarkable to me the many times those who are in positions of power in the world turn to believers to find answers to their problems. When everything is falling apart, people who know the heart and mind of God are called upon to provide answers. That was true of Pharaoh when he awoke, terrified by what he had dreamed. When the "magicians of Egypt, and all its wise men" failed to come up with explanations and answers, he finally turned to the one who knew God. I pray all of us will be available when those types of opportunities arise. When those who now smile at your seemingly restricted lifestyle, at your so-called piety, come calling and saying, "Help me. My world is falling apart," you will be able to provide answers for them.

Before his elevation to power and glory, Joseph had to serve on the front lines in his spiritual cold war. He was

rejected, misused, and forgotten, yet he had to serve God. There are some listening to me this morning who can identify with Joseph. They too are fighting a cold war. To you I say: remember that God gave himself to Joseph and went with him wherever he was sent. There is no more important truth than that. No matter how alone or misunderstood you are, the Lord is with you. Following the death of her sister, Corrie Ten Boom quoted the wonderful words which were uttered by Betsie when she was close to death:

Sleet stung us as we reached the outside. I stepped close to the stretcher to form a shield for Betsie and we walked past the waiting line of sick people, through the door and into a large ward. They placed the stretcher on the floor and I leaned down to make out Betsie's words. "...must tell the people what we have learned here. We must tell them. There is no pit so deep that He is not deeper still. They will listen to us, Corrie, because we have been here."

"There is no pit so deep that He is not deeper still." There is no need so all-encompassing that God cannot meet it. As Christians, we know how the story will end. At present the other side may be winning, but we know that everything will one day sing the praise of God. These glorious words from Revelation 21 reveal the end of every human story:

And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the dwelling of God is among men, and He shall dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be among them, and He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there shall no longer be any death; there shall no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away." And He who sits on the throne said, "'Behold, I am making all things new.'" And He said, "Write, for these words are faithful and true." And He said to me, "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life without cost. He who overcomes shall inherit these things, and I will be His God and He will be My son."

Each of us occupies a different place in the line of battle, and each of us has everything we need to succeed as spiritual warriors: the unfailing presence of the Lord, and certainty of victory.

Let me urge you to take heart from Joseph's story. I will close by quoting the well-loved old hymn, How Firm A Foundation,

"Fear not, I am with thee; O be not dismayed, For I am thy God, and will still give thee aid; I'll strengthen thee, help thee and cause thee to stand, Upheld by my righteous, omnipotent hand.

The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose I will not, I will not desert to its foes; That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake, I'll never, no, never, no, never forsake!"

Catalog No. 4045
Genesis 40:1-41:57
Seventh Message
Steve Zeisler
June 14, 1987
Updated December 16, 2000

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