

I. INTRODUCTION

Opening Prayer: Father, thank you for speaking to us through your word, which is an anchor for our soul during the storms of life. Would you now speak through me to your people assembled in this sanctuary this morning. May you open their hearts, clear their minds, and sustain their focus to receive grace and truth through the preaching of your word. May our time together glorify you and build up your church. In Christ's name, I pray, Amen.

Joni Eareckson Tada is a hero of the faith who recently turned 76.¹ She's a hero because despite becoming a quadriplegic due to a diving accident when she was 17, she has been a tireless advocate for Christ and an inspiring beacon of light for him, especially among the disabled community.² At 17, the same age as when Joseph's life was turned upside down, Joni heard her doctor say, “You're gonna be paralyzed for the rest of your life, without use of your hands or your legs.” Though she wanted to, she couldn't end her life physically, so instead she wanted to end it emotionally, mentally, and spiritually.³

But, out of sheer desperation and pain, she cried out one short prayer that changed her life: “Oh, God, if I can't die, **show me how to live.**” She realized that “God permits what he hates to accomplish that which he loves.” What he loves most is for his children to truly and deeply know, trust, and love him. So, despite incredible adversity and setbacks, Joni realized that God would have her go through such things if it meant spiritual health and well-being. As a result, she stopped “banging on heaven's doors to get me healed. I began submitting to his Word.”

As we go through the life and trials of Joseph, we have seen him repeatedly betrayed and suffer injustices, yet still submit to God's word and rely on him. Now in chapter 41, we will see him proclaim God's word to Pharaoh and undergo a remarkable, meteoric rise from prison to Pharaoh's palace; from prisoner to prime minister. Through this rise, brought about by affliction, **we understand how God is faithful in our sufferings and helps us be fruitful through them.** Whether feast or famine, God is faithful and fruitful for our flourishing.

As you'll see in your handout, I've divided this chapter into two main sections that highlight God's faithfulness and fruitfulness, along with sub-points focused on Joseph's rise from the nadir to the apex of power. Please follow along as we grasp that God is faithful and fruitful in and through our suffering.

II. FROM PIT TO PALACE: GOD'S FAITHFULNESS IN JOSEPH'S SUFFERING

a. Joseph Powerless in Prison and Pharaoh's Nightmares (vv1-8)

This chapter starts off with the phrase, “After two whole years.” Don't just gloss over that. Think about how Joseph waited two long years after helping save the cupbearer's life and expecting him to save his! But also recall what Pastor Jason previously said of how God had his good purposes

¹ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2025/10/joni-eareckson-tada-76th-birthday>

² Joni is the founder of “Joni and Friends,” which seeks to “bring practical help and Gospel hope to people with disabilities around the world.” <https://joniandfriends.org/about/>

³ “Joni Eareckson Tada's Story and the Birth of Joni and Friends,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OUm2zQNKVcE&t=32s>

to let Joseph wait in prison so that he was available precisely when Pharaoh needed help. Of course, such waiting must have been excruciatingly hard. And for us waiting can be like that too. But, as Calvin wrote: God “purposely, for a long season, keeps his own people in anxious suspense, that by this very experiment, **they may truly know what it is to trust Him**” (*Comm.*, 312).

In verses one to seven, Pharaoh’s nightmare occurs twice. The imagery of the dreams, cows and grain, concerns food, but it is very disturbing. Verse 8 says Pharaoh’s “spirit was troubled.”⁴ But we see how none of the magicians and wise men could interpret his dream. They cannot help, so Pharaoh is in a real bind.

b. Joseph Rushed to the Palace to Interpret Pharaoh’s Dreams (vv9-36)

As the king frets about his dream, in verses 9 to 13, his cupbearer remembers his own dream in prison and how Joseph helped him. He also finally remembers Joseph (two years late) and refers him to his boss. Not surprisingly, Pharaoh wants to see Joseph.

So, in verse 14, Joseph is summoned from the “pit” (v14), referring to his prison (cf Ge 40:15) and recalling the cruel act of betrayal by his brothers when he was 17. Given the urgency of Pharaoh’s troubles, he is “quickly brought” to the ruler, shaved and changed to adhere to Egyptian protocol while being in the presence of the ruler. Amazingly, before Pharaoh has uttered a single word about his dream, in verse 16 Joseph is confident that **God will give him a “favorable answer.”** The word “favorable” here is *shalom*, which refers to the welfare of Pharaoh and by extension the whole world, as eventually all nations will be going to Egypt to seek food.

But not only is the answer favorable, it comes from God. Pharaoh was considered a deity, but Joseph boldly mentions the true God in his presence; he is in essence proclaiming the superiority of the God of Israel over all of the gods of Egypt, including Pharaoh himself. He does not succumb to pressure or wilt in the face of worldly power. If you were Joseph, think of how you might be tempted to respond to Pharaoh when he says in verse 15: “I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it.”

Would you choose to flatter Pharaoh and tell him what he wants to hear to curry favor and avoid punishment? Surely you would not want to anger the very personification of power in Egypt and go back to your filthy pit. Or perhaps you would be tempted to be over-confident like the sorcerers of Nebuchadnezzar who kept telling the Babylonian king that on their own they’d tell the right interpretation of his dream even though they really had no idea what to do.⁵ Or, maybe you’d let God do the interpreting but say “Oh, I know it!” and take credit for what God reveals.

Thankfully Joseph chooses none of those responses. Instead, he is steadfast and humble, and **directs Pharaoh away from himself and to God.** Joseph does not get seduced or overcome by the pomp and splendor of Pharaoh’s palace. Instead, he lifts God up, who is rising over the Nile, over

⁴ The Hebrew word for cows is *parot*, and for pharaoh it is *par’oh*. So perhaps he saw in the destruction of cows, a foreboding of his own destruction. Also, one commentator notes the phrase “two whole years” suggests Pharaoh’s dream happened on his birthday (cf 40:20, reference to birthday), which gives weight to its importance.

⁵ Nebuchadnezzar saw they were just stalling for time and said they spoke “lying and corrupt words” before him (Dan 2:9).

mighty Pharaoh who shows himself to be a mere man, shaken to his core by nightmares. We would profit much by doing the same when tempted to elevate ourselves instead of the Lord God Almighty.

In verses 17 to 24, Pharaoh recounts his dream from the first-person perspective, which more or less tracks what we already heard.⁶ This repetition is not wasteful though; it is meant to reinforce the gravity of the situation and also build up suspense. We are left dying to know, what exactly is the meaning of Pharaoh's dreams?!

Joseph gives his interpretation in verses 25 to 32, which has two defining characteristics: (1) the fixedness of what is to come, and (2) the severity of suffering that will occur. First, Joseph explains the dream, noting how God has "revealed" (v25) and "shown" (v28) to Pharaoh what he is about to do: there will be 7 years of plenty followed by 7 years of famine. Then he says in verse 32: "And the doubling of Pharaoh's dream means that the **thing is fixed by God, and God will shortly bring it about.**" Notice how marginalized Pharaoh is in Joseph's interpretation and how powerless he is to stop what is coming because it is "fixed by God." God is in control of history and so can announce upcoming events with certainty. He does this out of mercy so that people have time to prepare and respond.

[Gospel Call]: This reminds me of why Jesus came and why the gospel has been preserved in the pages of Scripture. It is the revelation of God's mercy so that sinful man can respond and be saved. If any of you do not yet know Christ, do know that God has revealed and fixed the end of history, which involves a final judgment and reckoning of every sinful act, word and thought you've ever had. For those in Christ, his blood covers all their sins, which are forgiven. But, for you who do not yet know him, what will cover your sins? What will you do in light of this knowledge of God's upcoming judgment? Turn to Jesus and trust in him as your personal Lord and Savior. Believe that he died on the cross for your sins and was raised to life for your salvation. Know that it is God's mercy to give you advance notice so you can repent and trust in Jesus before it is too late.

Back to Joseph, not only is his interpretation firm, it is also severe. He spends far more time on the famine than on the harvest. In the original Hebrew, there is only one sentence on plenty (v 29), but five sentences dedicated to famine in verses 30 and 31. In those two verses, he emphasizes how the gravity of the famine will overshadow the prior years of abundance. In fact, the time of plenty will be "forgotten" and "unknown" because the famine will be "very severe."

Ironically though, for Joseph, his life is about to be the opposite; he has been in his own emotional and severe famine for 13 years, which included the betrayal by his brothers, being sold into slavery, a false accusation of rape, imprisonment, and abandonment by those whom he helped. But God remains faithful and is about to bring forth plentifulness for him.

You see, beloved, feast (or plenty) and famine are both means of God accomplishing his will. Famine drove Abraham to Egypt, where he was then blessed by an earlier Pharaoh on the account of Sarai (Gen 12:10-16). Famine caused Naomi to go to Moab, where Ruth then entered into and transformed her life. Feast and famine are the ways God will bring about the reuniting of Jacob's family.

⁶ There are some added details like how the thin, ugly cows remained just as ugly even after eating fat cows (v21).

Naturally, we just want feasting...no famine. But, famine, suffering, hardship...these things inevitably come. Yet, be hopeful in your famine – whether that be anxiety over finding a job or staying at one, exhaustion over caring for loved ones, spiritual apathy, depression because you feel you're not enough or will never measure up, disappointment over a relationship or family matter, or some other affliction – **be hopeful in your famine for God is faithful to bring about good in your life in his perfect timing.** Remember that God is faithful in your suffering.

Jayson and Jenny Low, and their 7-year old son Jackson, despite being from Las Vegas have become dear friends with a number of families in this congregation. How is that possible? It's because Jayson has had to come to Houston periodically for cancer treatment. It's been astounding to see God work in their lives, even though Jayson has faced so many ups and downs and setbacks in his journey to get better. When I asked if I could mention them in my message, with typical generosity they said, "We would be honored!" So with their permission, I wanted to share some of their thoughts as they experience both famine and hope.

Jayson wrote: "When I found out I had cancer, my first thought was of Jenny and particularly Jackson as he was only 4.5 years old. My mind immediately went to how much I would miss him and Jenny and all that's still left undone. Also, selfishly I wondered if my son would forget about me if I passed when he was so young. I was distraught to say the least and trusting in God was the only thing that pulled me out of my despair." Praise the Lord that during Jayson's season of severity, he has drawn closer to God. But, it gets even better. During this past retreat, we had the absolute privilege and joy to see his wife and son pray to receive Christ! And Jayson and Jenny would like to get baptized together at HCC in the near future. This amazing good was brought about by God through Jayson's suffering. Great is his faithfulness indeed!

And while I kindly ask you to remember Jayson and his family in your prayers, he wrote he does not "hold on so tightly for a given outcome." In fact, he recognizes healing is not guaranteed. And *because* of that, he says: "I've come to appreciate the blessing of another day on this earth as God's greatest gift to me, which has deepened my gratitude and relationship with God... God willing, together we will face the future and triumph over my cancer but regardless, we will spend eternity together in Heaven." Beloved, be hopeful in your famine for God is faithful to bring about good in your life in his perfect timing.

Now to finish off this first main section, Joseph also pro-actively provides his advice to Pharaoh in verses 33 to 36 on how to respond to his dream. Joseph is discerning, wise, and prudent in his preparation of collecting and storing food with the knowledge of what God will do. Prudence and faith do not have to conflict, but rather prudence is to be exercised in response to God's revelation. "The knowledge of God's purpose is not the end of human planning and action but the beginning of it."⁷

III. FROM PRISONER TO PRIME MINISTER: GOD'S FRUITFULNESS THROUGH JOSEPH'S SUFFERING (VV37-57)

So up to now, we have seen Joseph's physical move from the pit to Pharaoh's palace. We have witnessed God's faithfulness in Joseph's sufferings as he is called in at a providential moment, and empowered by God, to interpret the king's dreams. Now for the rest of this chapter, we will focus on

⁷ Hughes, 481.

Joseph's identity shift from prisoner to prime minister. Accompanying such a shift is fruitfulness that God brings to Joseph's life through the afflictions he suffered.

a. *Joseph Rises to Power as He Is Promoted by Pharaoh (vv37-45)*

Pharaoh recognizes God at work within Joseph. In verses 38 and 39, Joseph once again finds himself over a house. Before it was Potiphar's house, then it was the jailhouse, and now it is Pharaoh's house, meaning all of Egypt! Accordingly, Pharaoh promotes Joseph and in verses 42 to 45, and **gives him proper recognition in 5 ways**. First, he gives him objects of power: He gives him his signet ring, fine linen garments and a gold chain. Second, he gives him an escort of power. In verse 43, runners were to go before Joseph's chariot, crying "Bow the knee!", a command to the people to pay homage to Joseph. Chariots were the limousines of ancient Egypt, so it was like the Secret Service clearing the way for an important dignitary. Third, Pharaoh gives him words of power. In verse 44, no one can lift up his hand or foot without Joseph's consent. His words are to be obeyed. Fourth, the king gives him a name of power. He renames him "Zaphenath-paneah," which likely meant "God speaks and he lives" (Hamilton, 507-08). An apt, royal name that encapsulates divine reality. Lastly, Pharaoh gives him a family of power. Joseph is married into the priestly caste, which had commanding influence in Egyptian life, further enhancing his stature. His wife Asenath was of aristocratic blood, whose father was from On, the center of worship of the Egyptian sun-god Re.

Having been bestowed with so much power and undergoing such a tremendous transformation in less than 24 hours (keep in mind that Joseph was still in prison in the morning of the day all of this happening), Joseph is actually in great spiritual danger.⁸ Why was that? It had to do with Joseph being so thoroughly Egyptianized. "His clothing was Egyptian, his name was Egyptian, his language was Egyptian, his wife was Egyptian, and his father-in-law was the leading Egyptian sun-worshiper."⁹ Pharaoh wanted to make Joseph Egyptian because he knew that to have real influence among a group of people, you have to be accepted by them. And usually that happens when you become one of them. [*Illustration of Melvin and CCFers*]

Would Joseph, in his exercise of Egyptian power, forget his identity as a Hebrew? Worse, would he forget the God of Israel? Would he allow all this earthly power get to his head? You know when you're in the "pits," it can be "easier" to turn to God and depend on him. But when you're in the "palace," at the pinnacle of power, you may begin to turn away from him and toward independence. When you're at the peak, looking down on people is easy, but looking up to God is hard. Life at the top can breed pride and ugliness of soul. As our Lord warned us, "[W]hat will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeit his life?" (Matt 16:26).

So, here we have Joseph, a wise, handsome, well-built young man of 30, having been escalated to the second highest position in the land...everything is literally at his fingertips. What more can he ask or do? He can bask in his glory and live in comfort and throw God to the sideline...this is a real danger to his soul. But, thankfully just as God did not forget Joseph, **Joseph does not forget his God.**

⁸ Grateful for R. Kent Hughes' commentary for this insight.

⁹ Hughes, 487.

b. Joseph at the Pinnacle of Power as Prime Minister (vv46-57)

Joseph remains obedient to God and trusts in his word that there would be 7 years of plenty, then 7 years of famine. He works hard to secure grain, which becomes so great that documenting it all becomes impossible (v49). It was “like the sand of the sea,” which echoes God’s promises to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob to make their descendants as numerous as the sand on the seashore. This poignant allusion prepares us for the birth of Joseph’s children in verses 50 to 52.

We read there that before the famine came, during the time of plenty, God blesses Joseph with two sons. The first is named **Manasseh**, which means “he who causes to forget.” There is some irony here because every time he calls Manasseh by his name, the word “forget!” is invoked, yet Joseph can never truly forget the injustices he suffered, especially at the hands of his family. No, Joseph instead will remember those wrongs and tragedies in light of God’s larger work for good (50:20). **Joseph’s “scars have been beautifully incorporated into the intricate pattern of God’s grace in his life,** and Joseph is determined not to forget that.”¹⁰

[Illustration of hostile reaction from Melvin’s dad 20 years ago about possibly entering into ministry.] This is a scar I carry with me, but I remember it now in light of God’s tapestry of grace and good purposes for me, such as allowing me to truly count the cost, enabling me to comfort those who go through similar hardship, and understanding better when Jesus said to Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9).

So, beloved, **if you have suffered or are suffering now, I’m not asking you to forget that, but rather entrust that to our faithful God who weaves his grace in such suffering for your good.** In fact, I suggest you spend some time journaling about your suffering, praying to God and actively giving it to him, and then reflect on the ways God’s grace has become more real and visible in your life due to such suffering. I think you’ll be surprised at what the Lord will reveal to you.

Joseph’s second son is named **Ephraim**, which means “fertile.” In verse 52 we learn he chose this name because “God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction.” Note, God did not deliver Joseph out of the land of affliction. Joseph is still *in the land of my affliction* (v52). Yet God has made Joseph fruitful in such a land, which is not his home. Fruitful not just in terms of progeny, but reputation, influence, and faith.

Joni Eareckson Tada is helpful again. As she reflected on her affliction, she realized the fruitfulness God brought about by it: “Had I not broken my neck, I’d probably be on my second divorce, maxing out my husband’s credit cards, planning my next ski vacation. I wouldn’t be here extolling the glories of the gospel and the power of God to help a person smile, not in spite of the problems but because of them.” So, brothers and sisters, **if you are in a land of affliction now, know that the Lord can make you fruitful even there.** So much so that your blessing and abundance overflows to help others.

With these distinctly *Hebrew* names of his two sons, Egyptianized Joseph recognizes that God has always been at work through all of his difficult circumstances. And in the final part of this chapter, verses 53-57, we read that all that Joseph foretold came to pass. The 7 years of plenty

¹⁰ ESV Expository Commentary, Vol. 1, 365.

conclude and the famine comes with a vengeance; it is severe and spreads all over the earth. “[T]he people cried to Pharaoh for bread” (v55), but by that time, Joseph was really the one in charge as Pharaoh simply directs the starving people to him.

IV. CONCLUSION

Indeed, the last verse says “all the earth came to Egypt to Joseph to buy grain.” Later in chapter 45, when comforting his brothers, Joseph tells them that “God sent me before you to preserve life” (v5). In this way, **Joseph prefigured he who was sent by God almost two millennia later to save life**, who was affected by dreams regarding Egypt, who also started his public ministry at 30, and who was humiliated by men and then exalted by the Father. This is Jesus, who was also known as “Immanuel,” which means “God with us” (Mt 1:23). For, just as God was with Joseph in his tribulations, Christ dwells in our hearts by the Spirit and is with us in ours.

I know the tendency to not go to the cross daily and instead lie in bed and not want to face the day. I know for some of you, certain conditions, circumstances and problems can be debilitating and depressing. But, may those things force you into the arms of Christ every morning so that you may experience him as faithful and fruitful. Without his adversities – his famine and afflictions – Joseph would not have found God to be like this.

Not all misery suffered by Christians will result in earthly glory like Joseph. That might happen to some of us. But, most of us will probably fade into earthly obscurity, which should not bother us because God knows our faith, works and heart. O Lord, show us to live! And he has shown us! It is for Christ to increase and we to decrease (John 3:30). It is to help point others to Jesus. It is to suffer for him, for he too learned obedience through suffering and became fruitful through his afflictions. In fact, by his wounds, we have been healed (Is 53:5). When we see Jesus in heaven, we will see his body not free from scars and nail prints in his hands, but rather his body with them; for they glorify him because they remind us of the cross and how by his death, he redeemed a new people for himself with eternal life, hope and joy.

The grain that Joseph stored, even though beyond counting, still inevitably ran out at some point. But, Jesus says, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst” (John 6:35). **Go to Jesus then, the greater Joseph, who is faithful and fruitful in and through your suffering.**

Closing Prayer: Father, thank you for this episode of Joseph’s life, where we see your faithfulness and fruitfulness at work. Help us to live for you by dying to ourselves, carrying our cross daily, and decreasing so that Christ may increase. Sustain us to have a long obedience in the same direction of holiness and godliness. Comfort those here who are in a season of famine or severity. Strengthen their faith that you will bring about good in your perfect timing. Make your hope come alive in their hearts as you hold them fast and close to you. We give you all the glory and pray this in the name of our Lord Jesus, Amen.