

Succeeding at Suffering

How God Develops the Patience of His People

Genesis 40

Objectives

- To discuss why God allowed Joseph to go to prison, and what this teaches us about how God works.
- To develop principles for suffering successfully when hardship comes our way.

Overview

“Where did I go wrong?”

“I didn’t do anything to deserve this.”

“God, why are you doing this to me?”

Typical statements of the sufferer. He wants life to work right. He wants it to be predictable and orderly and obedient to the rules. And the rules are simple: If you live right, then good things happen; if you live poorly, then consequences come. A little fairness, that’s all he asks. He just wants to harness the principles of decency and morality and make life work for him. If it doesn’t, then someone somewhere blew it...either he did, or you did, or God did.

Isn’t this the idea that underlies most of our living? Let’s face it: That life ought to be fair is the common philosophy of all mankind.

That is, until the rug gets pulled out. When good people—like me!—suffer bad things, then our thoughts change. We wonder whether justice, order, or God himself even exists.

Of course they do...they’re just lurking in the shadows. God hides for a time to test our faith and character. He uses things like persecution and harassment as “mettle-detectors.” They show what lies beneath the surface of our everyday Christian behavior. After all, any two-bit fraud can counterfeit faith in good times, but only the true blue can live it in bad times. Suffering is the difference between just wearing the jersey and actually playing the game. Fans wear the duds; players shed the blood.

So God reminds us not to be surprised by suffering (1 Peter 4:12; 1 John 3:13). It’s par for the course in a world hostile to Christ-followers; and it’s God’s standard m.o. for faith development. When it comes to building people, there’s nothing like pain.

Thankfully, there is a pay-off for passing the test. In fact, God reserves his greatest rewards for those who stand firm. A crown of blessing, a place with the prophets, a hundred-fold return, and a high rank in the kingdom await those who successfully suffer (Matt. 5:11-12; Mark 10:29-30; 2 Thess. 1:5). In Joseph’s case, God used prison to make final preparations for his future life of service and leadership. It was the darkest period in Joseph’s life, but it finally gave way to the light of day.

Leader's Study

On one level, Joseph's life just does not compute: First, his father favors him with a special coat. Result? Family strife. Second, God gives him a vision for his life. Result? More strife and slavery in Egypt. Third, Joseph faithfully resists temptation. Result? Imprisonment. Could anything else go wrong?

Sure! While in prison, Joseph again won the trust of his master. The warden put him in charge of all the prisoners and God graced him with success. Over time, Joseph befriended two of Pharaoh's attendants and assisted them with the interpretation of their God-inspired dreams. When Pharaoh's cupbearer was restored to his position, Joe made a simple request: *Put in a good word for me!* Maybe he could manage the kitchen or land a job driving chariots.

Of course, God had bigger things in mind, so the cupbearer forgot Joseph (Gen. 40:23). He forgot him for two full years! (41:1). Here's another thing that doesn't compute: Joseph selflessly serves and befriends the downcast. Result? He is forgotten and ignored.

What's going on here? Patience-production is going on here. James 1 says it best: The testing of faith produces perseverance, which yields maturity. God is refining Joseph. He is finishing him. The product will be a selfless, wise, and radically God-centered man. There will be no childish pride left, no more guile or deception, no more manipulation. The chain of family sins will be broken and Joseph will be ready for anything. Ready to rule Egypt. Ready to save a nation. And ready to forgive his brothers.

How to Suffer Successfully

1. **Live by faith, not by sight.**

Everything in Joseph's life looked out of order. Blessings led to sufferings. Faithfulness led to punishment. In times like these we begin to think, "Life is senseless, faithfulness is pointless, and God is absent...I might as well strike out on my own." *Don't do it.* Hold on to faith. God is there all along the way—39:2 says the Lord was with Joseph in Potiphar's house; 39:21 says the Lord was with him in prison. When God can't be seen or felt, he must be believed.

2. **Seek to serve in every situation.**

Joseph served faithfully in Potiphar's house and in prison. He attended Pharaoh's officials and sought to comfort them when they were dejected (40:4, 6). No matter where we land in life, opportunities always exist to serve.

3. **Apply your spiritual gifts in your current circumstances.**

A man with Joseph's administrative abilities deserved a cushy corporate job—but God had him apply his gifts in slavery and imprisonment. A guy with Joseph's spiritual sensitivity deserved a place with the wise men—but God had him interpreting inmates' dreams. Here is the principle: Accept even imperfect opportunities to express your spiritual giftedness.

4. **Don't try to manipulate your future.**

In Gen. 40:14-15, Joseph sounds desperate, and understandably so. Somehow, some way, he wants out! But God's timing is perfect and trying to push his timetable forward only results in added frustration. Wait and let God be God.

Discussion Guide

Open Up

- Have you ever been punished for something you didn't do? (Share some examples.)
- Have you ever been punished not just for something you didn't do, but for a good thing you did do? (Share some more stories.)
- Do you know what it is called when a person suffers for doing good? (Persecution)
- How do you feel—toward others and toward God—when you're persecuted?

Dig In

Transition into your study by talking about persecution in Joseph's life. The story today opens with Joseph in prison, accused of attempted rape.

Read Genesis 39:20–40:23, or tell the story creatively and in detail. Then discuss it:

- How do you think Joseph felt as this episode opened? How did he feel when it closed?
- What do you think Joseph thought about God and his plan for Joseph's life?
- What strikes you as being really cool about how Joseph handled imprisonment?
- After interpreting the dreams of Pharaoh's officials, Joseph asks the cupbearer to put in a good word for him. Yet the guy forgets about him. Why might God have allowed this?
- What principles or rules for suffering can we learn from this passage? What would Joseph consider to be the secrets to suffering successfully?

Close Out

1. What is the God-designed final product of suffering in our lives? What is the final product for those who don't know or follow God?
2. Are you suffering in any way right now? How are you facing it?
3. What opportunities for service or spiritual gift development exist within your difficult circumstances? What is God calling you to do during this time of testing?