

## **DON'T BE SURPRISED BY TRIALS**

*37 Jacob settled in the land where his father had been a sojourner, namely, the land of Canaan. <sup>2</sup>This is the account of Jacob's family. Joseph, who was seventeen years old at the time, was feeding the flock with his brothers. He was just a young lad with the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives. Now Joseph brought the report concerning their bad conduct to their father. <sup>3</sup>Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because Joseph was the son born to him in his old age; so he made for him a multi-colored robe. <sup>4</sup>Joseph's brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers; so they hated him and could not speak peaceably with him.*

*<sup>5</sup>Now Joseph had a dream, and he told it to his brothers. Then they hated him all the more. <sup>6</sup>He said to them, I beg you, listen to this dream which I dreamed:<sup>7</sup>we were binding sheaves of grain out in the field, and my sheaf rose up and stood upright. Your sheaves came and bowed down to my sheaf. <sup>8</sup>His brothers said to him, Shall you, indeed, reign over us? Or shall you, indeed, have dominion over us? So they hated him all the more because of his dreams and because of his words.*

*<sup>9</sup>Joseph had still another dream, and he reported it to his brothers. Listen, I have had another dream. In this dream the sun and the moon and eleven stars bowed down to me. <sup>10</sup>He also told it to his father as well as to his brothers. His father rebuked him, and said to him, What is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall I and your mother and brothers indeed come and bow down to the ground before you? <sup>11</sup>So his brothers envied him; but his father kept the thing in mind.*

*<sup>12</sup>His brothers went to graze their father's flock near Shechem. <sup>13</sup>Israel said to Joseph, Are not your brothers grazing the flock near Shechem? Come, and I will send you to them. And he said to him, Here I am. <sup>14</sup>And he said to him, Go now, see if all is well with your brothers and with the flock; then report back to me again. So he sent him off from the valley of Hebron and he came to Shechem. <sup>15</sup>A certain man found him there, wandering in the field; so the man asked him, For whom are you looking? <sup>16</sup>And he said, I am looking for my brothers; please tell me where they are grazing the flock. <sup>17</sup>And the man said, They have moved on from here; I heard them say, Let us go to Dothan. So Joseph went after his brothers and found them near Dothan.<sup>18</sup>They saw him from a distance. Before he came near to them, they plotted against him to kill him. <sup>19</sup>They said to each other, Look, here comes that dreamer. <sup>20</sup>Come, let us kill him and throw his body into one of these cisterns. We will say, A wild animal has devoured him; then we shall see what becomes of his dreams.*

*<sup>21</sup>When Reuben learned about their plot, he tried to deliver Joseph out of their hand. He said to his brothers, Let us not take his life. <sup>22</sup>Do not shed any blood. Throw him into this cistern here in the wilderness, but do not lay your hands on him. He said this so that he might deliver Joseph out of their hand and restore him to his father.*

*<sup>23</sup>When Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the multi-colored robe that he was wearing. <sup>24</sup>Then they took him and threw him into the cistern. Now the cistern was empty, there was no water in it.*

*<sup>25</sup>As they sat down to eat their meal, they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead. Their camels were loaded with spices, balm and myrrh; they were carrying their cargo down to Egypt. <sup>26</sup>Judah said to his brothers, What profit is there if we kill our brother and cover up our crime? <sup>27</sup>Come, let us sell*

*him to the Ishmaelites, and let us not lay our hands on him; for he is our brother, our own flesh. His brothers agreed with him. <sup>28</sup>So when some Midianite merchants passed by, the brothers pulled him out of the cistern and sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. They brought Joseph to Egypt.*

*<sup>29</sup>When Reuben returned and saw that Joseph was not in the cistern, in grief he tore his clothes. <sup>30</sup>Then he returned to his brothers and said, The boy is not there; now what shall I do?*

*<sup>31</sup>So they slaughtered a he-goat, and then took Joseph's robe and dipped the robe in the blood. <sup>32</sup>They took the multi-colored robe with them and presented it to their father, and said, We found this. Examine whether or not it is your son's robe.<sup>33</sup>Jacob recognized it and said, It is my son's robe. A wild animal has devoured him; without doubt Joseph has been torn to pieces. <sup>34</sup>Then Jacob tore his garments and put on sackcloth; he mourned for his son for many days. <sup>35</sup>All his sons and all his daughters came to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted. He said, I will go down to Sheol to my son mourning. So his father wept for him. <sup>36</sup>Now the Midianites sold him to Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officers, the captain of the guard. (Gen. 37:1-36)*

## **Introduction**

When asked what trends he saw among contemporary Christians, an astute Christian leader identified three trends: 1) a faulty concept of God; 2) unrealistic expectations; and 3) incredible shock and hurt when they encounter trials in their lives (*POWER*, 5/31/92, p.8.)

It seems that many contemporary Christians assume that there is a verse in the Bible that reads:

Row, row, row your boat,  
gently down the stream.  
Merrily, merrily, merrily,  
the Christian life is like a dream.

This is a view of the Christian life that is obviously very appealing—the full and immediate experience of heaven on earth, and it is a view that may be erroneously conveyed by the church today. The message, “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life,” can easily be misconstrued.

So here you go—merrily, merrily, merrily—rowing the boat of your Christian life gently down the stream. Then, suddenly, unexpectedly, you hit the rapids of trial, you're thrown against the rocks of adversity, and the roaring surge of affliction completely drowns out that happy chorus. What happens now? You may be tempted to say, or at least to think, such things as, “I never bargained for this! God has let me down! I'm angry at God!”

That is the reaction and attitude that can easily set in if we fail to recognize a very basic biblical principle: In conjunction with the LORD's divine calling and promise, we can expect to encounter divinely ordained trials.

This is exactly what happened to Joseph. Early in Genesis 37 Joseph, by means of two dreams, receives a revelation of God's divine calling and promise. But by the end of the chapter he is sold into slavery, carried away into Egypt, and there he encounters another whole series of trials.

Let us consider the case of Joseph in order to understand the divine purpose of these trials, to see how he benefited from them, and to discover what God wants us to learn for our own Christian lives. Let us remember this: Because you possess the LORD's divine calling and promise, you may expect to encounter divinely ordained trials.

## **I. You May Expect Divinely Ordained Trials, Intended to Purify You from Sin**

Genesis 37:2 states that Joseph brought to his father *"the report concerning his brothers' bad conduct."* One commentator points out that what Joseph reported to his father was not what he had personally observed but what others said about them (H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis*, Vol.2, p.954.) There seems to be a hint here that Joseph lacked discretion and may have possessed a self-righteous spirit, perhaps similar to that described in Luke 18:11 where the Pharisee prays, *"God, I thank you, that I am not like the rest of men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector."*

Genesis 37:5-11 records Joseph's dreams and his reaction to them. In the first dream his brother's sheaves all bow down before his sheaf; in the second dream the sun, moon, and eleven stars bow down before Joseph. The theme in both dreams is the same: Joseph is given a position of dominion over his brothers. God's purpose was for the sake of His covenant people, as Joseph comes to understand and of which he eventually testifies in Genesis 45:5,7-8,

*And now do not be grieved nor angry with yourselves that you sold me here as a slave; for God sent me ahead of you in order to preserve your lives ...  
7God sent me ahead of you to preserve you as a remnant on the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance. 8So now it was not you who sent me here, but God. (Gen. 45:5,7-8)*

But at this point in his life Joseph is overly impressed with the position of pre-eminence and has not grasped the purpose of that position: service for the cause of Christ and for the sake of his family. Note that he immediately reports the dreams to his brothers and in so doing he emphasizes his position of pre-eminence (Gen. 37:5,9.) It is only later, after he has passed through a series of severe trials, that Joseph gains a godly perspective (note again Genesis 45:5,7); the trials have produced a godly humility in this man.

Genesis 50:18-21 records Joseph's response to his brothers when they appear before him and seek his mercy:

*His brothers came and bowed down before his face; and they said, See, we are your servants. <sup>19</sup>And Joseph said to them, Do not be afraid; am I in the place of God? <sup>20</sup>As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to accomplish what is now being done, namely, the saving of many lives. <sup>21</sup>Now therefore fear not. I will take care of you and your little ones. So he comforted them and spoke kindly to them. (Gen. 50:18-21)*

Joseph's response is to willingly extend mercy and forgiveness to his brothers. There is no longer any trace of a self-righteous spirit—which is usually accompanied with harshness and the demand for full satisfaction of justice, note the attitude of the Pharisees with regard to the woman caught in the act of adultery, there is present the self-righteous desire for justice, assuming that they themselves are exempt:

*Then the scribes and the Pharisees brought to him a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery. They made her stand before them, <sup>4</sup>and they said to Jesus, Teacher, this woman has been caught committing adultery—caught in the very act. <sup>5</sup>Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such a person. What then do you say about her? (Jn. 8:3-5)*

The divinely ordained trials that have come into Joseph's life have served to purify him from sin: 1) mercy and compassion have replaced self-righteousness; and 2) humility has replaced pride in his God-given calling.

You may expect divinely ordained trials, intended to purify you from sin. Note the testimony of the Psalmist: *"Before I was afflicted I went astray; but now I observe your word"* (Psl. 119:67.)

## **II. You May Expect Divinely Ordained Trials, Intended to Prove Your Allegiance to Christ**

As noted, at the outset of Genesis 37 Joseph received great promises and a great calling from God, but by the end of the chapter he is sold into slavery and shipped down to Egypt.

He could have become disillusioned and embittered against God; he could have adopted the attitude expressed by Job's wife: *"Then his wife said to him, Are you still maintaining your integrity? Renounce God and die!"* (Job 2:9.) But we find that Joseph maintained his integrity and his commitment to God; note his testimony made to his brothers as they stood before him: *"Joseph said to them ... Do this, and live; for I fear God"* (Gen.42:18.)

The whole incident involving Potiphar's household and his wife (Genesis 39:1-23) demonstrates Joseph's continuing commitment to the LORD. The very fact that Potiphar entrusts the oversight of his whole household to Joseph is evidence that he recognized Joseph to be a man of integrity. When Joseph is confronted with the seductions of Potiphar's wife it becomes evident that his integrity stems from a holy fear and reverence of God, for he asks her, *"How can I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?"* (Gen. 39:9.)

The time Joseph spent in prison (also recorded in Genesis 39:1-23) further demonstrates his continuing commitment to the LORD. He has been cast into prison on false charges—and despite his integrity; indeed, it was even because of his integrity and his refusal to succumb to seduction that he wound up in prison. The very fact that the keeper of the prison felt confident to entrust the every day affairs of the prison to Joseph shows that he found Joseph to be a man of integrity.

Thus, despite the trials he encountered—trials he encountered even because of his integrity—Joseph continued to remain faithful to the LORD. Job's personal testimony may also be seen to be that of Joseph: *"until I die, I will not renounce my integrity. I firmly hold on to my righteousness and will not let it go; my conscience shall not reproach me as long as I live"* (Job 27:5-6.)

Throughout all of Joseph's trials in Egypt there is the re-occurring phrase, *"Jehovah was with Joseph"* (found in Genesis 39:2,21.) The awareness of the LORD's presence and covenant faithfulness inspired Joseph's continued commitment. Conversely, Joseph's continuing commitment insured the LORD's continued favor and presence.

You may expect divinely ordained trials, intended to prove your allegiance to Christ. Note the commentary of the Psalmist concerning the life of Joseph: *"Until the time that Jehovah's word was fulfilled, the word of Jehovah tested him"* (Psl. 105:19.)

### **III. You May Expect Divinely Ordained Trials, Intended to Prepare You for Greater Service and Glory**

The original promise God gave to Joseph was that Joseph would be placed in a position of pre-eminence for the sake of service. The trials and predicaments Joseph encounters prior to the fulfillment of that promise have a common feature: Joseph is put in a position of pre-eminence for the purpose of service. After he is sold into slavery, he is made the overseer of Potiphar's entire household. After he is sentenced to prison, he is made overseer of the entire prison.

With each successive trial two things are being accomplished: 1) Joseph is getting more and more experience for the position to which the LORD has

ultimately called him—he is being led through a succession of “apprenticeships;” and 2) Joseph is coming to better understand the purpose of God’s calling; namely, service for the cause of Christ and to the people of God, not self-exaltation.

When the time comes for the fulfillment of the promise, Joseph is ready to assume the position of second in command over all of Egypt—and willing to fulfill that position for God’s purpose:

*God sent me ahead of you to preserve you as a remnant on the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance. <sup>8</sup>So now it was not you who sent me here, but God; and he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and master over his entire household and ruler over all the land of Egypt. (Gen.45:7-8)*

You may expect divinely ordained trials, intended to prepare you for greater service and glory. Let us remember and take to heart the words of our Lord Jesus Christ:

*His master said to him, Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a few things, I will give you charge over many things. Enter into the joy of your master. (Matt. 25:21)*

*He who is faithful with a very little will also be faithful with much, but he who deals in an unrighteous manner with a very little will also deal in an unrighteous manner with much. (Lk. 16:10)*

## **Conclusion**

One of the very important lessons we must learn from the life of Joseph is this: When you possess the LORD’s divine calling and promise, you may also expect to encounter divinely ordained trails.

When those trials do in fact come, in order to cope with them, it is very helpful to realize their God-intended purposes: 1) to purify you from sin; 2) to prove your allegiance to Christ; and 3) to prepare you for greater service and glory.