

THE PITFALL OF HARD TIMES

THE POINT:
TRUST GOD TO SEE YOU THROUGH ANY CRISIS.

Leader pages on pp. 148-151

GENESIS 41:28-32,47-54

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²⁸ “It is just as I told Pharaoh: God has shown Pharaoh what he is about to do. ²⁹ Seven years of great abundance are coming throughout the land of Egypt. ³⁰ After them, seven years of famine will take place, and all the abundance in the land of Egypt will be forgotten. The famine will devastate the land.

³¹ The abundance in the land will not be remembered because of the famine that follows it, for the famine will be very severe.

MEMORY VERSE

³² Since the dream was given twice to Pharaoh, it means that the matter has been determined by God, and he will carry it out soon.

⁴⁷ During the seven years of abundance the land produced outstanding harvests. ⁴⁸ Joseph gathered all the excess food in the land of Egypt during the seven years and put it in the cities. He put the food in every city from the fields around it. ⁴⁹ So Joseph stored up grain in such abundance—like the sand of the sea—that he stopped measuring it because it was beyond measure.

⁵⁰ Two sons were born to Joseph before the years of famine arrived. Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest at On, bore them to him.

⁵¹ Joseph named the firstborn Manasseh and said, “God has made me forget all my hardship and my whole family.” ⁵² And the second son he named Ephraim and said, “God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction.” ⁵³ Then the seven years of abundance in the land of Egypt came to an end, ⁵⁴ and the seven years of famine began, just as Joseph had said. There was famine in every land, but in the whole land of Egypt there was food.

KEYWORDS

Manasseh (v. 51)—This name reflected the fact that God had helped Joseph forget his hardship both in Egypt and in his whole family, with its sordid background of rape (34:2), murder (34:25-26), incest (35:22), deception (34:13, and betrayal (37:28).

Ephraim (v. 52)—This name confessed that God had made Joseph fruitful in the land where he had once been treated as a despised felon.

WHAT STEPS CAN WE TAKE TO TRUST GOD THROUGH A CRISIS?

Life is full of ups and downs. A basketball star shoots a game-winning three-pointer, and his name is all over the media. The following week, however, an injury brings his career to a shocking end. He goes from hero to zero. The opposite can also happen. A teenage girl living in poverty creates a YouTube® video, and it goes viral. Within days, she's offered multiple opportunities to sing. Her sudden success inspires young musicians everywhere.

Sudden reversals can flip the script for all of us, creating a test of our faith and character. For many of us, the arrival of the pandemic in 2020 caused just such a sudden reversal.

In today's study, we'll see Joseph travel from the prison to the palace in a single day. His many years of suffering were finally repaid with a huge personal reward. Notice the way Joseph kept his eyes on God through the good times and the bad. While success can cause some to grow self-sufficient and self-absorbed, Joseph modeled for us what it means to remain faithful no matter how high or low life takes us.

Seek God's Wisdom

// Genesis 41:28-32

As seen previously in Joseph's life, dreams created a domino effect for him. This was the third time this had happened. He first told his brothers about a dream, and it landed him in Egyptian slavery (Gen. 39:5-11). Later, the dreams of a baker and a cupbearer could have freed him from prison but didn't (40:8-23). Now, two years later, the powerful Egyptian pharaoh awoke with a troubled soul, desperately looking for an interpretation of his dreams. This third dream sequence of Joseph's life would lead to incredible success.

The last domino was related to the cupbearer's earlier dream. Joseph had asked the cupbearer to remember him before Pharaoh when he was released from prison (v. 14). The cupbearer did, but two years later! It was all in God's timing.

Pharaoh's dreams were visually vivid: healthy grain, thin grain, fat cows, and skinny cows. Only one Person could interpret those dreams,



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the One to whom Joseph looked when Pharaoh gave him the opportunity. “It is God who will give Pharaoh a favorable answer” (v. 16). The meaning of Pharaoh’s two dreams was: for seven years, Egypt would have great abundance, but the following seven years would bring devastating famine. Joseph ended the interpretation saying, “The matter has been determined by God, and he will carry it out soon” (v. 32).

The way Joseph boldly spoke for God should inspire us all. While Pharaoh believed himself to be divine, Joseph unapologetically represented the One and only true God. Rather than taking credit, he gave all glory to God. Joseph was thoroughly God-centered in the lowest and highest moments of his journey. Nothing took his eyes off the Lord.

HOW DO WE GAIN CONFIDENCE LIKE JOSEPH’S WHEN GOD REVEALS HIS PLAN?

Experiencing the test of sudden reversals moving from a good situation to a terrible one can cause disappointment. We might assume God has abandoned us and become bitter. On the other hand, when our lives take a turn for the better, we can be tempted to become big-headed. Instead of thinking God has forsaken us, we can be the ones who forsake God, walking away from God in our thoughts and actions.

Unfortunately, this is the story of far too many people, but not Joseph. Through thick and thin, he kept his eyes on the Lord.

Follow God’s Plan // Genesis 41:47-49

Joseph’s initiative and confidence is admirable. Boldly, Joseph offered a brilliant “business plan” to get through rough years ahead (41:33-36). Pharaoh recognized Joseph’s unique talent, so he promoted Joseph to second in command.

For the first seven years, the rains came down and the crops came up—just as the Lord had said! The economy was booming, and throughout the ancient Middle East, people celebrated the riches of the land. Through those wealthy years, Joseph didn’t become overconfident. He took advantage of the rich season and “put the food in every city” (v. 48).

Joseph took in all the wealth of the land, but he never allowed power or wealth to hypnotize him. He kept his eyes on the



DIGGING DEEPER JOSEPH’S LEADERSHIP

Consider the task given to Joseph. First he had to learn about Egypt and its agriculture. The skills God had given Joseph plus learned knowledge allowed him to fulfill Pharaoh’s decree. Joseph was able to collect one-fifth of the grain harvested in each of the seven years of plentiful produce. Collecting the food required him to establish and supervise an organization composed of workers with a wide array of work skills. They would need to know how to construct buildings, collect and transport the harvest, and account for, as well as protect, what had been gathered. Supervisors to work under Joseph’s leadership would be needed as he carried out the God-given plan, managing the project closely for a span of seven long years.

What role does strong leadership play in a crisis?



Lord and remembered what God told him. The season of prosperity was a blessing, but the tide would roll out just as it had rolled in.

WHEN IS IT EASIEST OR MOST CHALLENGING FOR YOU TO FOLLOW GOD'S PLAN?

Over the past two decades, tragedy has hit the U.S. in unimagined ways. With a new millennium, hijackers attacked the twin towers of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, and an unprecedented era of terrorism began. A “new normal” became our reality. Then, eighteen years later, while the economy was soaring, a small news story leaked out telling of a strange virus spreading from China to other countries. Within weeks, a global pandemic shut down church services, restaurants, sporting events, and concerts. Social distancing, mask wearing, and video calling became normal everyday practices.

As we read Joseph's story, we encounter a man who was prepared to deal with plenty and with poverty. He didn't allow seasons of wealth to catch him off guard; instead, He followed God's plans, storing for the future. There's wisdom for us here. As the apostle Paul said, we should learn to embrace the joys that come with all financial situations:

“I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I find myself. I know how to make do with little, and I know how to make do with a lot. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being content—whether well fed or hungry, whether in abundance or in need. I am able to do all things through him who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:11-13).

Be Fruitful Even in Famine

// Genesis 41:50-54

While Egypt's economy was thriving, Joseph experienced other blessings. The Lord gave him the gift of family. In those first seven years as prime minister, Joseph fathered two sons, and their names had significant meaning.

- **Manasseh.** Manasseh means “he who causes to forget.” His birth helped Joseph put the past behind him. For thirteen years, he may have mentally replayed his brothers' betrayal. As a prisoner, he wrestled with painful memories of disloyalty. But Manasseh enabled him to realize he had his own family to build and release any remaining toxic emotions.

Consider how much time most of us spend second-guessing previous decisions. Those painful moments, however, become essential to our growth as believers. James says, “Consider it a great joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you experience various trials, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance” (Jas. 1:2-3). The pain of the past can make us productive in the future.

- **Ephraim.** Ephraim means “fertile” and describes the season of life Joseph was enjoying. Not only was his family growing, but so were his influence and leadership. The Lord allows each of us to experience unexpected seasons of blessing, filled with gratitude, hope, and joy. Joseph knew hard

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times were ahead, but he named his second son “fertile” so he wouldn’t forget the bright seasons, which balanced out the dark ones.

The names Manasseh and Ephraim were meaningful names because of their significance, but they were also special because they were Hebrew names. It’s easy to overlook this critical decision Joseph made to keep his commitment to God. Surrounded by Egyptian culture and gods, he didn’t waiver from his faith in the Lord.

The surprising aspect of Joseph’s life wasn’t that he praised God in times of plenty, but that he remained faithful in seasons of suffering. He learned that the Lord could be trusted. We must do the same. As the world becomes more secular, Christians will be increasingly disregarded, and believers will need to count the cost of following Jesus. We’ll find hard times can be moments of great spiritual growth.

HOW CAN JOSEPH’S STORY HELP US HOPE IN GOD DURING THE HARDEST TIMES?

DID YOU KNOW?

Today’s researchers believe dreams have health benefits. They have discovered dreams help us to process emotions and other things in our lives.²⁴ Through Joseph’s life, God used dreams to impact his and others’ futures greatly. We know dreams were important because of how deeply troubled Pharaoh was about his dreams and the number of “experts” he called upon for interpretation. Joseph was born to provide the interpretation Pharaoh needed because God had influenced him through sets of dreams since childhood. Each set of dreams was a reminder God was in control and orchestrating the events of Joseph’s life as he affirmed in Genesis 41:32, “Since the dream was given twice to Pharaoh, it means that the matter has been determined by God, and he will carry it out soon.”

Since today Christ-followers shouldn’t rely on dream interpretation for God’s guidance, how does God reveal He has determined matters in our lives?

LIVE IT

What helps us to overcome the crisis we face?

The coronavirus took hard times to an unimaginable level for the entire world. Most people had never experienced a global pandemic in their lifetime and had little knowledge of how to navigate it. Quarantine, social distancing, masks, and vaccines became realities no one could avoid in attempts to get the crisis under control. What lessons through this pandemic and other crises help us to trust God?

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- **Be mindful.** Realize most people experience crisis, so it’s usually inevitable. Though God allows crisis in our lives, remember you’re not alone. Take time to meditate on Bible verses about facing trials.
- **Be faithful.** Consider God uses crisis to build our spiritual immunity through endurance and perseverance. Spend consistent time in prayer asking Him to strengthen your faith and trust in Him.
- **Be fruitful.** Though some became sedentary through shelter-in-place, others found creative ways to connect, serve, and develop new skills. Discover ways to serve God more during crisis.

DAILY READINGS

1. DOUBLE DOWN // GENESIS 41:32

Though I'm not a card player, I've heard the phrase "double down" on game shows when the contestant is taking a risk that their decided course of action in the game is correct. Merriam Webster defines the phrase as "becoming more tenacious, zealous, or resolute in a position or undertaking."²⁵ In this verse, Joseph declares we're not taking a risk when God tells us to do something twice. Instead, we can be confident that "the matter has been determined by God, and He will carry it out." When God repeats something, we can "double down" and be confident He will do it.

Ask God to give you discernment and confidence in His reassurances in His Word.

2. BEYOND MEASURE // GENESIS 41:49

When was the last time you expected God to bless you beyond measure? Some people wonder why we don't see more modern-day miracles in Western Christianity. Yet there are many miracles witnessed in Third World countries. Could it be that we have become so comfortable in our self-sufficiency we don't expect God to move on our behalf? Or is it that we feel so distanced from God we dare not ask Him to bless us with His limitless favor? Without our expectations or desire for His miraculous power to be manifested in our lives, we may be missing out on God's blessings beyond what we can measure.

Let's stretch our faith so that through prayer we will experience God's presence and power beyond measure.

3. WHAT'S IN A NAME // GENESIS 41:51-52

It was common practice during biblical times for children to be given names because of specific events occurring in their parents' lives or associated with their birth. It was believed the children personified the name given and would live out the meaning of their names. When Joseph named his

two sons, he acknowledged the Lord's faithfulness to him and his family through their Hebrew names. His father and mother had named him and his brother Benjamin specifically to honor God.

Those who follow Christ have been called by His name. We should live a life that always makes His name great and brings Him glory.

4. TRIAL OFFER // JAMES 1:2-3

Usually when we hear the term "trial offer" it means a temporary period for receiving benefits for free or at a lesser price. One of the main factors about the trial is that it is temporary. Yet it's meant to encourage the patron to want the full benefit with a willingness to pay the full price. Let's look at the trials of life from this perspective. They are temporary, but they are meant to produce a desire in us for their full benefit. Though trials may be difficult, God allows them to strengthen our faith, draw us closer to Him, and produce endurance in us according to James. Endurance means we will be able to withstand future trials.

Ask God to change your perspective on the trials He allows in our lives to see them as a test of our faith to develop endurance.

5. TRIUMPH IN TROUBLE // PSALM 71:19-21

When trouble comes, one of the last things we might think of is triumph. Most times our minds focus on why we're experiencing trouble, when it'll end, who's to blame for it, or whether we'll make it through. As we mature as believers, we must come to understand the benefits of trouble are directly connected to testing and proving the depth and strength of our faith. For Christ's followers, trouble enables God to place us in difficult circumstances, so He can provide comfort, the ability to stand, or a way out. Whatever the result, God's goal is for our triumph in Him through our trouble.

In the midst of trouble, turn to God. He will help you to triumph through.