

FOUR HOPES FOR HARD TIMES

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How should we confront the difficult times life invariably brings? One way is to learn from those who have succeeded in similar straits. Joseph the patriarch faced incredible trials, and his life holds many lessons to give us hope. Let's look at four.

DELIVERANCE IS COMING

At age 17 Joseph (one of 12 sons of Jacob) was cast into a pit by his brothers, who plotted to kill him. Why? Because Joseph was their father's favorite, and he singled Joseph out for special favors.

Plus, Joseph had two unusual dreams indicating that his family would eventually bow before him in subservience. They hated him even more for his dreams.

The eldest brother, Rueben, actually opposed the plot and intended to rescue Joseph. Perhaps he might even have furtively whispered, "Don't worry, my brother. I'll get you out of this pit and restore you to your father." But in Rueben's absence, the others pulled Joseph from the pit and sold him to slave traders bound for Egypt. (Gen. 37:2-22).

Joseph received deliverance alright, but it didn't come in an agreeable, expected way. What only God knew, however, was that Joseph had an unbreakable appointment 13 years later to stand before Pharaoh, king of Egypt, to effect deliverance for those who hated him.

Has the hurtful sting of betrayal put you in a "pit"? Deliverance may not come when or how you envision it, but expect God to act on your behalf. (1 Cor. 10:13).

DELAY IS NOT DENIAL

A wealthy Egyptian, Potipher, purchased Joseph and soon put him in charge of his whole household. But when falsely accused by Potipher's wife, Joseph was cast into prison and laid in irons. Despite his unfair circumstances, however, Joseph's diligence motivated the chief jailer to make him supervisor of all the prisoners. (Gen. 39:21-23)

Then unexpectedly, when Joseph was 28, two fellow prisoners, Pharaoh's chief cupbearer and chief baker, each had a puzzling dream. Joseph interpreted and gave the cupbearer good news: in three days he would be restored to his former position. But the baker would be executed. Desiring relief, Joseph implored the cupbearer, "Please remember me to Pharaoh, and get me out of this house."

But even though events unfolded exactly as Joseph had said, the cupbearer forgot him, leaving him to languish in prison two more years doing his duty. (Gen. 40:1-23).

Perhaps you've asked God to release you from a painful trial and believe He's forgotten because nothing has happened. His delay is not necessarily a denial of your request; the timing may not yet be right. Duty is what we do until deliverance comes.

YOU CAN HAVE A FRUITFUL FUTURE

When Joseph was 30, Pharaoh himself had two terrifying dreams. When none of his wise men could interpret, the cupbearer suddenly remembered Joseph, whom Pharaoh immediately summoned!

Stunned by Joseph's insight, Pharaoh instantly made him Prime Minister and gave him a wife, who would eventually bear him two sons. The first he named Manasseh because "God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father's household." The second he named Ephraim, "For," he said, "God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction." (Gen. 41:51-52).

Able to forget even the treachery of his own brothers, Joseph could look to the fruitful work God had planned for him.

Have bitter circumstances caused you to expect nothing better or different in the future? On the contrary, your future can bear much good fruit—but you must assuredly set aside the bitterness of the past.

GOD'S PLAN IS BETTER THAN YOURS

At age 56, Joseph took his two sons to his dying father to be blessed, but instead of following the customary, accepted procedure, Jacob placed his right hand on the head of the younger Ephraim. This deviation greatly displeased Joseph, who immediately attempted to "fix" his father's "mistake" by grasping Jacob's hand to move it to Manasseh's head. But his father refused and said, "I know, my son, I know. . . . However. . . ." (Gen. 48:14-19).

Though physically blind, Jacob's spiritual eyes had seen what Joseph could not see and overrode Joseph's plan and desire for his firstborn son.

Have your plans not worked out as you thought they should and left you facing outcomes you'd wished to avoid? Perhaps God has said "however" to your plan because He sees what you cannot, and His way will indeed be better than yours in the long run.

Joseph experienced hard times much like ours: jealous betrayals, unfairness, unfaithful friends, tedious delays, and undesirable turns of events. But despite all of these, he grew and succeeded because of an unswerving trust and confidence in God. That should give us hope for ourselves, no matter what we must face.

(Note: A detailed audio version of this message is available at www.james-mc.com)

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