

LIVING AS EXILES
Joseph—*Pharaoh's Right-Hand Man*
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In over 31 years of being a pastor, I've been involved in many different aspects of ministry: youth, young adults, overseeing our staff, discipleship, evangelism, leadership development, volunteer ministry, counseling and pastoral care, community outreach and preaching come to mind. But one of the things I'm most passionate about—John King calls it my “stump speech”—is seeing people embrace God's call on their lives to be missionaries wherever they are and whatever they are doing. The starting point for living as a missionary is understanding that none of us is where we are by chance. In Acts chapter 17 we read:

“From one man [God] made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands.”

– Acts 17:26

It is God who placed us where we are and He is the one who directs our steps.

I've titled this four-week sermon series “Living as Exiles,” because the word *exile* accurately describes our circumstance. As followers of Jesus, we're living in a place that's ultimately not our home. In 1 Peter, the Apostle Peter addresses his 1st Century readers (and us) as foreigners and exiles. We're exiled until eventually we take our place in God's kingdom for eternity. Throughout the Bible, God's people walked through seasons when they were exiled from their homeland, living in places like Egypt, Babylon and Persia in the Old Testament, and across the Roman Empire in the New Testament.

The life of an exile is challenging, because they call the place where they're located “home,” all the while knowing that where they live isn't their true and permanent home. To survive they need to actively engage in the culture they're in, but their heart is often far away in their homeland.

In Jeremiah 29, God instructed his prophet Jeremiah to write a letter to the Jewish people living in exile in Babylon. Jeremiah challenged God's people not to pay attention to a false prophet named Hananiah who was claiming God had told him that in two years the Jewish people would be freed from Babylonian rule and would be able to return to their homeland. Hananiah encouraged the Jews not to engage in the life of Babylon but to await God's deliverance. Listen to the message God gave Jeremiah...

This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper." – Jeremiah 29:4-7

These verses countered the words Hananiah was prophesying and they stand in sharp contrast to the message we sometimes receive today that says, "*If heaven is our home, why should we invest in this world?*" As followers of Jesus, we are exiles, but God's call isn't for us to be detached from and uninvested in the world around us. No, all of Jesus' followers are called to be missionaries, seeking to bring justice, peace, joy, life and hope to our world. The prayer Jesus taught his disciples highlights his mission for us. He prayed, "*Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven*" (Matthew 6:10). Every one of us is called to be a missionary. Our mission field is our homes, our neighborhoods, our schools, the places where we work and where we recreate. In each of those environments we're commissioned to see God's will done on earth as it is in heaven.

To help us wrestle with what it means for us to live as exiles we're going to explore the lives of four Old Testament characters: Joseph, Daniel, Esther and Nehemiah. Out of all the examples I could have chosen in the pages of the Bible, I've chosen these four for three specific reasons:

1. Each of them was a Jew—God’s chosen people—who lived and flourished as an exile in a foreign country.
2. All of them eventually landed in a place of power and influence in a foreign court where they enjoyed the favor of the rulers whom they served.
3. In their positions, each of them were used by God to advance the cause of his people.

I’m going to kick off the series today by looking at the life of a man named Joseph. Joseph’s story is found in chapters 37-50 in the Bible’s first book, Genesis. Hang with me as I recap Joseph’s story:

Joseph was the eleventh of 12 sons born to Jacob, Abraham’s grandson. He was favored by his father Jacob, because his mother was Rachel, Jacob’s favorite wife. For much of their marriage, Rachel had been unable to have children, but finally God blessed her with a son whom she named Joseph. In Genesis 37:3–4, we see the problem Jacob’s favoritism caused:

Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made an ornate robe for him. When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him. – Genesis 37:3–4

God gave Joseph two dreams which he unwisely shared with his already jealous brothers. In each dream Joseph was elevated and his brothers bowed down in front of him. The brothers’ jealousy culminated when Joseph was sent by his father to check on them while they were shepherding sheep in a distant place. (Again, note the favoritism—while his brothers toiled in the fields, Joseph remained with his father and mother until he was sent out to bring back word on how his brothers and the sheep were getting along.)

When Joseph’s brothers saw him approaching from a distance their anger boiled over. They said:

“Here comes that dreamer! Come now, let’s kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we’ll see what comes of his dreams.” – Genesis 37:19–20

When Joseph arrived they stripped him of his robe and threw him in a cistern. After one of the older brothers pleaded with them not to kill him, they eventually sold him as a slave to some traveling merchants headed South toward Egypt.

I want to pause for a moment in Joseph’s story and think about the trauma Joseph must have been experiencing. Just hours before this he was a favored son in his wealthy father’s house. Now he was bound like a criminal and transported as a slave. Just a day ago, as a young man of 17, Joseph didn’t know what his future held, but he was confident God had a special plan for his life. Now, after being sold by his brothers as a slave, he was chained and headed for... he didn’t know where or what.

Back to Joseph’s story: The traveling merchants sold Joseph to a man named Potiphar who was an official to Pharaoh, King of Egypt. Joseph’s story is compressed into a relatively short space in our Bible, but it’s important to note that what I’m going to summarize in a few sentences took 13 years. Joseph was removed from his family and from his country, but as we read in chapter 39 God hadn’t deserted him. I’ll read verses 2-6 of chapter 39. As I read, take note of all the references to God’s blessing resting on Joseph and the favor Joseph gained with Potiphar.

The LORD was with Joseph so that he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master. When his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD gave him success in everything he did, Joseph found favor in his eyes and became his attendant. Potiphar put him in charge of his household, and he entrusted to his care everything he owned. From the time he put him in charge of his household and of all that he owned, the LORD blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph. The blessing of the LORD was on everything Potiphar had, both in the house and in the field. So Potiphar left

everything he had in Joseph's care; with Joseph in charge, he did not concern himself with anything except the food he ate. – Genesis 39:2-6

Joseph didn't know where all of this was leading, but it was obvious he was doing well. But there are seven words at the end of verse 6 that foreshadow coming trouble. We read, *"Now Joseph was well-built and handsome."* Being handsome and strong isn't a sin, but we go on to read that Potiphar's wife took notice of Joseph and repeatedly tried to seduce him. Joseph withstood her advances, at one point telling her that Potiphar had entrusted everything in his house to Joseph with the exception of his wife. How could he betray his master's trust? One day she grabbed him by his cloak and pleaded with him to go to bed with her. Joseph fled from her and as he left she grabbed his cloak and made up the story that Joseph had tried to molest her. After hearing her story, Potiphar had no choice but to have Joseph thrown into prison.

Let me push the pause button on Joseph's story again. Can you imagine how frustrating all of this must have been to Joseph? After being dislodged from his home and family and sold as a slave by his brothers, things seemed to be going well until he faithfully resisted sexual temptation, and all that got him was a new address in prison. Things couldn't seem to get any worse, but again we're told God was with Joseph. As I read verses 20-23 notice again God's blessing and the favor Joseph gained with the warden.

But while Joseph was there in the prison, the LORD was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden. So the warden put Joseph in charge of all those held in the prison, and he was made responsible for all that was done there. The warden paid no attention to anything under Joseph's care, because the LORD was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did. – Genesis 39:20-23

Sounds familiar doesn't it? Joseph is in a tough spot and everything appears to be going against Him, but God has not forgotten or deserted Him.

We don't know how long Joseph was in prison, but the whole ordeal lasted 13 years—from the time Joseph was 17 until he was 30—so it must have been a number of years.

After some time Pharaoh had his cupbearer and baker thrown into prison because they had displeased him. One night they each had troubling dreams and were so outwardly distraught the next day that Joseph asked them what was wrong. Joseph told them God could interpret their dreams and so they confided their dreams to him. After listening to the cupbearer's dream, Joseph told him that he was going to be restored to his position by Pharaoh. The cupbearer promised that if Joseph's interpretation was correct and he was released he would tell Pharaoh about Joseph's wrongful imprisonment, so he could get out of prison as well. Unfortunately for the baker, his dream wasn't so favorable, it foretold impending death. Verse 23 of chapter 40 tells us, *"The chief cupbearer, however, did not remember Joseph; he forgot him."*

For two more years Joseph languished in prison, and then Pharaoh had a dream. When the cupbearer heard that no one could interpret Pharaoh's dream, he remembered Joseph. He told Pharaoh about the young Hebrew and Joseph, after shaving and showering and being dressed in fine clothes, appeared before Pharaoh. God enabled Joseph to interpret Pharaoh's dream—that the world would experience seven years of abundance followed by seven years of devastating famine—and Pharaoh elevated Joseph to the second in command in all of Egypt. Joseph would oversee the storing of grain during the seven years of abundance and the distribution of it during the seven years that followed. Pharaoh said,

Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. You shall be in charge of my palace, and all my people are to submit to your orders. Only with respect to the throne will I be greater than you." –
Genesis 41:39–40

Joseph's story is amazing—if you've never read it, do yourself a favor and take 30 minutes or so this afternoon to read it. I don't have time to unpack all the drama of the brothers who sold Joseph into slavery coming to him for food years later, but I'll summarize the story with these words. Twice Joseph saved his extended family by distributing food to them, and after the second time, his father, Jacob, and his entire extended family—a group numbering 70

people—traveled to Egypt where they survived the famine and became Pharaoh’s shepherds. It was in Egypt that God not only protected Jacob and his family, but he established Jacob’s family as the Israelites, God’s chosen people.

Joseph’s riches to rags to riches story is a powerful story of God’s faithfulness, but it provides special inspiration for us as exiles. As exiles, what can you and I learn from Joseph’s life about being missionaries who love and serve people and point them towards God’s love for them?

First of all, No matter how dark and confusing and far off course things get, God is with us, and He is still working out his plans. Joseph was hated, betrayed, forgotten and dismissed by people, but God never left him. When things don’t go as we’ve planned and when we can no longer see how God is going to work out his purposes in our lives, we can trust that He’s with us and we haven’t been forgotten. I love a statement the famous 19th Century preacher Charles Spurgeon made: “God is too good to be unkind. And he’s too wise to be confused. When I cannot trace his hand, I can always trust his heart.”

Secondly, Joseph’s faithfulness and humility positioned him to receive God’s favor and blessing. Some people point to Joseph as someone who foreshadows Jesus, because the Bible doesn’t dwell on any of his flaws. I’m not sure I’d go that far, but Joseph is portrayed in an extremely positive light. However, as we look closely at Joseph’s early years, I don’t think it’s a stretch to think Joseph probably struggled with pride and arrogance. His naivete in telling his brothers about his dreams, which conveniently elevated him and portrayed them bowing in front of him, probably point us to his struggle with pride. And while Joseph’s brothers’ hatred came from jealousy of their father’s favoritism, it seems like Joseph’s pride probably contributed to their jealousy. In exile Joseph maintained his faithfulness to God. He resisted the advances of Potiphar’s wife. On several occasions when he was called on to interpret dreams, Joseph made it clear that any ability he had to interpret dreams came from God, not from his own wisdom or strength.

As you and I experience God’s blessing and as He gives us favor with others, it’s easy and tempting to take the credit for ourselves, rather than giving praise and glory to God. It’s not being a good person or accomplishing success out of our own strength that brings glory to God.

As Jesus reminds us in John chapter 15, It's only as we abide in him that we'll bear fruit that will last. Joseph never lost sight of God and the fact that it was God's blessing and favor that allowed Him to experience the success that he did.

Finally, the end result was that God gave Joseph influence beyond what he could ever have imagined and used him mightily to fulfill God's purposes in a foreign land where Joseph lived as a slave. Only God could have orchestrated the turn of events that took Joseph from slave and prisoner to Pharaoh's right-hand man within a day. Joseph's turn of events happened quickly, but it was years in the making. I love Genesis 50:20. After Joseph's father, Jacob, died his brothers were afraid that Joseph would now turn on them to get his revenge. Joseph reassured them with these powerful words, *"You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives"* (Genesis 50:20). People have observed that this is a parallel verse to Romans 8:28, which we looked at last week, *"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."*

As we study Joseph's life, we can't help but be impressed by his perseverance. In spite of having no clue what God was doing, Joseph persevered and God was faithful. I'm in no way equating myself with Joseph, but I've seen the value of persevering when I didn't seem to be able to make sense of what God was doing in my life as it relates to being a missionary. Shortly after Greta and I were married, God began impressing on our hearts a desire to connect in relationship with those who didn't know Christ. We tried reaching out to neighbors and even worked at forming a Bible study in our apartment complex, but we didn't seem to be able to get any traction. Then as our oldest daughter, Bronte, reached school age and began playing soccer, doors began to open. As we volunteered in our kids' classrooms and as I coached many sports teams, we began developing relationships with many people in our community.

Later we were seeing the relationships develop, but we weren't seeming tangible fruit. I was especially feeling that about coaching. One Sunday morning as I was preaching on Matthew chapter 7 where Jesus says, *"Ask and it will be given to you. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened to you."* I sensed God telling me that while I hadn't seen much fruit, He

was going to answer my prayers. And within several weeks, I began seeing some fruit in the lives of men I was coaching with.

More recently as I was part of Mechanicsburg's School Board, I was lamenting that in my new role I had positional influence, but I wasn't sure how God would use this to impact lives. God gave me peace that while my circumstances had changed, He was giving me opportunities to be in an administrative role and to impact board members through personal relationships. Being on Mechanicsburg's school board has been a very different role from coaching youth sports, but I've watched God use me in that role in a variety of ways, and my involvement in that role has opened doors for McBIC and for other pastors and churches in our community to shine Jesus' light in our school district.

My encouragement to each of you is to embrace the call God has for you to be a missionary wherever you are and whatever you're doing, and as you embrace that call, be willing to hang in there like Joseph and persevere even when you don't see tangible evidence of what God is doing. God is at work and He'll continue to work in and through you as you, in the words of Henry Blackaby, "*Find out what God is doing and join Him.*"

"Let me tell you why you are here. You're here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You've lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage.

"Here's another way to put it: You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven. – Matthew 5:13-16 (The MESSAGE)