

Become the Person

Meant for Good Series Week 4: Genesis 41

9/17/17

Welcome/intro

This is week 4 in a series of messages called “Meant for Good”—if you’re new

We’re looking at the crazy life of a guy named Joseph in the Bible—some of the highest highs and lowest lows all wrapped into one life of anyone in the Scriptures

And because Joseph experiences so many different things there’s going to be lots of easily relatable things about it: to start with there was family drama and dysfunction, lots of it

Week 1 we read a story where his brothers sold him into slavery and faked his death to his father

And by the end of that story week 1 all of us felt much better about our own family dysfunction!

And then week two we saw that Joseph was a slave in Egypt but he was doing well—he’s getting raises and was promoted to management—but then he gets falsely accused and ends up in jail

But while in jail, he again ends up in charge, he’s a prisoner who is running the jail! taking care of the other prisoners

And last week we read as Joseph interpreted the dreams of two of his fellow prisoners, one of whom was the chief cupbearer who was in the presence of the king all the time

And Joseph pleaded with him: after you get out of here and are back in Pharaoh’s presence, remember me to Pharaoh and get me out of here”

But the chief cupbearer gets out of jail and FORGETS all about him. Completely and totally.

And where we left him last week is Joseph is still stuck in a miserable, ancient Egyptian jail with no hopes or prospects of ever, ever, ever getting out.

Throughout this story we’re seeing that two things are true in life:

first, hot mess happens. if we live long enough we’re going to experience pain and difficulty in this life, sometimes that happens TO us, we’re victims, and sometimes we create or generate the mess

secondly, the good news is that no matter how bad the mess, there’s a God who is bigger than the mess who has the power to redeem the mess—who can take your hot mess and my hot mess and work it for good, make it good, bring good out of it

Today, we’re going to start with something that I stink at: waiting! Any of you with me?

Especially if while I’m waiting, I’m kind of stuck in a place or a season of my life where I really, really want something to change.

It's one thing to be waiting in line at the grocery store for a couple of minutes—that's just inconvenient or a little annoying.

It's another thing to be stuck in a job you don't like but you still have to go to every single day, waiting for something to change

or waiting for the doctor to call back with test results and all the anxiety and fear that rolls around in your mind

Not all waiting is created equal, is it?

This morning, we're going to see how God springs Joseph out of jail—it's beyond his wildest dreams

But what's also important is that WHO Joseph has become during a whole lot of WAITING: what felt like pointless, at times hopeless, at times meaningless and crushing waiting.

And it's going to challenge you and I to figure out

What does it look like for us to wait in such a way that when that season of waiting is over we're not more cranky, more frustrated, more entitled, and less hopeful

But rather deeper, wiser, more hopeful in the God is always at work, even in the midst of what has felt like empty and pointless waiting.

Bible/no Bible/screen: Genesis 41—remember, this is immediately after we just read that the chief cupbearer was restored to his position, just as Joseph had said, and he'd forgotten all about Joseph back in jail

When two full years had passed, Pharaoh had a dream:

Andy Stanley is a pastor down in Atlanta and he's got great advice for people who are in the dating world.

He says if you're dating and searching for just the right person, here's the most important thing you can do: ***Become the person that the person you are looking for is looking for.***

If you want to find a great person to get married to, the most important person to work on or evaluate is not THEM, it's you.

The thing that should take up most of your energies is not the hunt for the right person, but the work of becoming the right person

As we pick up today in this story, it's been two years since we last saw Joseph and he's been sitting in jail all that time

And at that point, ***the road forks for Joseph***, while he's sitting there in jail just like it does for you and me when we face major disappointments in life:

he can either sink into the ***natural path which would be anger, bitterness, frustration with the world, with his situation, with everyone around him and ESPECIALLY with God***

This is the most natural path, the path of least resistance, and for many of us we've at points chosen that path, haven't we? Most of us have experienced disappointment and plunged into the abyss of anger, bitterness, frustration

That's one option before Joseph. But there's another option in front of Joseph, and that option is much harder and it goes in the complete opposite direction

Joseph can ***become the person that God is looking for.***

And as we'll see in just a bit during these two years after we last saw him, what we'll see is that Joseph has chosen this harder road. He's become the person that God is looking for

Now we don't get a lot of detailed instructions about what Joseph's been doing these two years, all we're going to see is the fruit of it and the results of it

But I had a great conversation this week with someone that I think might help us to understand what it takes to choose the path of becoming the person that God is looking for

This person is in a time of great transition in their life and in the life of their family, they've got a couple kids but they're looking to blow up their lives and do something totally different

And they want it to be centered on God and God's heart for the world. They want to get out of the corporate suburban rat race and make a difference somewhere in the world

So they're doing some poking around and asking questions and doing some research over the past couple of months, but nothing's become obvious and clear quite yet

And so we were talking about what it means to be in this season of waiting for them and two equally important and in some ways contradictory themes kept emerging

and I think that these are the ***becoming while waiting*** that we're going to see Joseph engage in

First, is ***acceptance***, a posture of willingness to receive what God has given and what God has not yet given.

"I am here for now, what might God have for me here?" A willingness to embrace that waiting is likely not forever, and to receive this time for what it is

and not constantly kick against the waiting or rail against it because sometimes when we do that we miss out on what God is doing around us or work he wants for us to do in the mean time.

This acceptance was one important part of their waiting process that I think makes for redemptive waiting, that keeps us from going down the path of bitterness or anger, that helps us to become the person that God is looking for

The second is kind of the opposite of those, it's **intentionality**. That we're not just throwing up our hands and saying "oh well, just waiting on God to magically change everything"

We're intentionally engaging in ways that shape our character, that build our faith, that prepare us for any work that God might have for us

For this couple, their asking questions about maybe doing more education or study while they're waiting.

They're trying to figure out how to continue to cultivate their own prayer lives and deepen their relationship with God to prepare them for what they hope is coming up ahead

They are both receptive to where God has them and not railing against it

While at the same time they are asking the question, "what can we do while we're waiting in this season that we would not choose for ourselves?"

What if we could be the kind of people that God could position almost anywhere and we could land there and make a kingdom difference, make an eternal difference, because we'd done good preparation work?

I want to suggest to you that weaving these two threads together when we're in places where we're stuck waiting and there's not a whole lot we can do to change a difficult situation is the key to redemptive waiting:

acceptance and intentionality woven together: to receive what you can't do anything about and to be intentional about whatever you CAN do to become the person that God is looking for

Here's the reality: almost all of us at some point in our lives is going to experience this kind of waiting that feels painful or like it's totally meaningless.

We can either waste it being frustrated or we can use it to become deeper, wiser, more beautiful, more alive human beings

Joseph seems to have cultivated this in his life while he's been waiting, and doing so has prepared him for this day, this event, when God gives Pharaoh this dream that's going to be the key that springs Joseph out of jail

When two full years had passed, Pharaoh had a dream: He was standing by the Nile, ² when out of the river there came up seven cows, sleek and fat, and they grazed among the reeds. ³ After them, seven other cows, ugly and gaunt, came up out of the Nile and stood beside those on the riverbank. ⁴ And the cows that were ugly and gaunt ate up the seven sleek, fat cows. Then Pharaoh woke up.

⁵ He fell asleep again and had a second dream: Seven heads of grain, healthy and good, were growing on a single stalk. ⁶ After them, seven other heads of grain sprouted—thin and

scorched by the east wind. ⁷ The thin heads of grain swallowed up the seven healthy, full heads.

So Pharaoh has these two dreams, and for the sake of time we're going to do some summarizing and skipping because this is a really long chapter and there's so much good stuff to talk about.

⁸ In the morning his mind was troubled, so he sent for all the magicians and wise men of Egypt. Pharaoh told them his dreams, but no one could interpret them for him.

This is a classic example of the old country song "looking for love in all the wrong places!" God has given Pharaoh this dream, and the people who don't know God won't be able to interpret it for him

So they're all scratching their heads in confusion, when an old friend pipes up, he's only 2 years too late

⁹ Then the chief cupbearer said to Pharaoh, "Today I am reminded of my shortcomings. ¹⁰ Pharaoh was once angry with his servants, and he imprisoned me and the chief baker ... ¹¹ Each of us had a dream the same night...

¹² Now a young Hebrew was there with us, a servant of the captain of the guard. We told him our dreams, and he interpreted them for us... ¹³ And things turned out exactly as he interpreted them to us...

¹⁴ So Pharaoh sent for Joseph, and he was quickly brought from the dungeon. When he had shaved and changed his clothes, he came before Pharaoh. [And when he arrived, perhaps he shot the cupbearer a bit of an ugly look!] ¹⁵ Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I had a dream, and no one can interpret it. But I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it."

In the hit Broadway musical Hamilton about Alexander Hamilton there's a song sung by Hamilton called "My Shot"

And the whole song is about how Alexander Hamilton came from a horrible background but he's got tremendous gifts

and he's going to scarp and claw and make a name for himself, overcoming all the obstacles in his path

I am not throwing away my shot, I am not throwing away my shot, I am not throwing away my shot

This, right here, is Joseph's unique shot. Plucked out of prison and into the presence of one of the most powerful men in the world at the time

And we're going to see how he enters into this moment, his big shot, here in just a minute

But I want to see how he got here. How does Joseph's shot even happen, how did he get to this moment right here?

Two biblical principles of "getting a shot" that are worth us considering here that we see with all the biblical heroes from Moses to David to Esther and beyond all the way through to Jesus and the rest of the New Testament:

Biblical principles of getting a shot

1. God's divine activity.

Two years ago, Joseph interpreted the cupbearer's dream for him--who gave the cupbearer that dream? God did

And as it turns out, that was a set-up: who's given Pharaoh this dream? God again

You can do all the work and all the hustle and all the praying and all the activity that you can imagine or do

but in every biblical story where God gives someone their shot, God's doing something that they and we couldn't manufacture or control.

In every biblical story where God positions someone to do something amazing, whether it's saving a whole nation from their enemies or simply changing the course of one person around them

At the core of it is God's divine initiative and activity that none of us can manipulate, force, or make happen in any way shape or form

Joseph's shot comes about because God has been at work all around him, even when it didn't especially look like it

it's God's activity and initiative that has driven this whole story to get Joseph to this moment in ways that Joseph and you and I have no control over

That's the core of it, but the other part of it ties back into what we were just talking about:

2. Becoming the person God is looking for

When we first met Joseph at age 17 in this story, he was a spoiled little self-absorbed brat.

But over the course of his life, as his life has taken one catastrophically bad turn after another, Joseph has chosen the path of life we talked about earlier

And in the process, Joseph has become the person that God is looking for to do something that will change world history forever.

And it's important to remember that one of the concrete examples we have of that is when Joseph helped the cupbearer when he was in prison

Joseph's small acts of faithfulness has laid track for God to give him his date with his shot, right here, right now, in this moment

As Jesus people, we engage in small acts of faithful service in part because that's what Jesus-followers do, we're commanded to do it, it's what Jesus does, it's how he rolls and we're following him

But what's also true is that when you do an act of faithfulness in the world, it's like sowing a seed.

Can you tell how big the plant it going to be by the size of the seed? This is how it is with our faithful acts of obedience. You sow the seed of faithfulness, there's no telling what God will do with it, how big or small it will grow, what kind of flower or fruit it might produce.

Pharaoh dials up Joseph out of jail, tells him that he's heard he has this gift of being able to interpret dreams

this is Joseph's big break, his big chance, he's not throwing away his shot but how he steps into his shot is telling about who Joseph is at this point in his life and how much work he's put into becoming the person that God is looking for

¹⁵ Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I had a dream, and no one can interpret it. But I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it." ¹⁶ "I cannot do it," Joseph replied to Pharaoh, "but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires."

A couple weeks ago we were in a meeting with our deacons and elders and football season was just kicking off and one of the most passionate sports fans around the table had just suffered one of the worst defeats in college football history

So to open up our meeting with a little fun, I had us all share our most gut-wrenching losses for our favorite teams in our lifetimes

And here was mine: I went to UNC, big Tar Heel fan. February 8, 2012, I'm at my first Duke-UNC basketball game in many, many years

And with just a couple minutes left, it looks like UNC has it in the bag, when Duke mounts one of the most maddening comebacks of all time

And ***with just 1.2 seconds on the clock, Duke's Austin Rivers*** puts up a 3-pointer to seal one of the greatest wins in the series

And sealed his fate as one of the most hated Dookies of all time!

And one of the things he had said leading up to the game in his typically arrogant and annoying fashion was this: **“I will make a difference in this game”** He had predicted that he, Austin Rivers, would make a huge difference in this game

And then, totally annoyingly, he did. And when he did, whose glory was that about?

Whose name was touted far and wide? Who got the adulation and the fame for all of that? He did.

He had a great gift, and like pretty much all of us, his natural bias was to use his great gift for the advancement of his own name, his own fame, his own prestige

Joseph here has his big shot to use his tremendous gifts in a way that will make a difference in this game. And whose name does he put front and center? God's.

Do you know what kind of character and humility it takes to stand in front of Pharaoh who has the power to release you, and then say that you can't actually solve his problem but you know someone else who just might?

One sign that you've become the person God is looking for is are you willing to point to him even when you're the vessel or instrument that's physically present and it's your gifts on display?

Are you willing to participate in God's work and at the same time be mindful of the fact that the gifts you're putting to good use in that moment are gifts that were GIVEN to you by SOMEONE else, and that someone else is God

When someone else takes your ideas or your research or your project and presents them as their own, you cry foul and demand that they give you credit

When we take what God's originated and present them as our own, we just shrug and say that's normal

At some point, as the fruit or the product of what it means that we're becoming the kind of person that God is looking for

we have to come to terms with the fact that God's the source of all our gifts, even the ones that look like it's all us, and even and especially the gifts that put us in a place of being noticed or important

And in some way, shape, or form, we have to find ways to at least every so often give God credit for the gifts he's given to us

it doesn't have to be super loud or obnoxious, could be subtle, could be a little more quiet, but we're finding ways that fit with our personalities and with our opportunities to put God front and center whenever we get our own, particular, shots.

Joseph here is standing in his shot, and he's demurs: God's the one who can do this, I'm just the instrument, I'm just the vessel.

So Pharaoh proceeds to tell Joseph about his two dreams: 7 fat cows, eaten by 7 lean ones, 7 good heads of grain and then 7 withered and scorched heads that swallowed them up

Here's Joseph's response in v. 28:

God has shown Pharaoh what he is about to do.²⁹ Seven years of great abundance are coming throughout the land of Egypt,³⁰ but seven years of famine will follow them. Then all the abundance in Egypt will be forgotten, and the famine will ravage the land.³¹ The abundance in the land will not be remembered, because the famine that follows it will be so severe.

Boom goes the dynamite! God has positioned Joseph to bring the gift he gave him to this situation, God speaks through Joseph to help him to interpret this critical message
this is utterly life-saving information and Joseph has just been the one to interpret it and break it to them

Joseph's job is done, at this point, he's probably already secured his get out of jail free card!

But Joseph isn't done. He's got more thoughts that he wants to share with Pharaoh about how to handle the situation that's coming, so he continues

³³ "And now let Pharaoh look for a discerning and wise man and put him in charge of the land of Egypt.

Pause here: who is Joseph talking to? So who's currently in charge of the land of Egypt? And what's Joseph telling Pharaoh he should do? Find someone else other than yourself, Pharaoh, this job might be too hard for you!

⁴ Let Pharaoh appoint commissioners over the land to take a fifth of the harvest of Egypt during the seven years of abundance.....³⁶ This food should be held in reserve for the country, to be used during the seven years of famine that will come upon Egypt, so that the country may not be ruined by the famine."

Now here's what's so interesting about this to me: the first part of what Joseph did was just take a dream that God gave Pharaoh and then give Pharaoh the interpretation of what God wanted to communicate

That's all straight-up and inside the lines: hear the dream, interpret the dream. That's within Joseph's purview and his gifting from God

But here, at this point, he's not merely interpreting something that God has initiated or already done

he's making policy proposals that are drawn from his own wisdom and understanding and creativity—when he's interpreting the dream, for sure, that's the word of the Lord, that's inside the lines

But here he's moving out on his own, improvising based on what God has shown them

But when you're becoming the person that God is looking for, what happens is that the things that you want and the ideas that you have and what God wants to do start to become one in the same

It's not perfect or infallible, but you're sharing his heart and his vision and his way of seeing the world and the situations you're facing and so your solutions and your instincts start to match up with his

One of my favorite authors Dallas Willard says that God's goal in our lives is our character would be so shaped and devoted and connected to himself

that he could empower us to do anything and everything we wanted, because we'd always want what he wanted, what was good and right

Joseph is becoming the person that God is looking for, and here in this moment he offers unsolicited, slightly insulting advice to Pharaoh on how to prepare for the famine that is coming

And it's full of wisdom and truth and it's exactly what God has positioned Joseph to do—to not just woodenly interpret what God has already said and that's it

But to bring a holy creativity to what's going to be a very difficult situation and ultimately to be an instrument of life in the face of what otherwise would be a whole lot of death

Here's how Pharaoh responds:

³⁷ The plan seemed good to Pharaoh and to all his officials. ³⁸ So Pharaoh asked them, "Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God?"³⁹ Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. ⁴⁰ 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."

***⁴¹ So Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I hereby put you in charge of the whole land of Egypt."
...⁴⁶ Joseph was thirty years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh king of Egypt.***

So Joseph goes from prisoner to Prime Minister in about 30 minutes! In probably the most meteoric rise to authority and position in all of the Scriptures

And so much of this has to do with what God's doing and it there's all kinds of things that Joseph couldn't have done and didn't do on his own: the dreams, the favor of God, the right people at the right time, all of that was God

But Joseph does have a role to play—we met him when he was 17 and he was kind of a spoiled brat. He becomes prime minister at age 30.

And in those intervening 13 years when life was difficult and bleak, Joseph embraced the challenge and the opportunity to become the person that God was looking for

Even if he didn't know anything about whether or not it would lead to anything or pay off in a practical and specific way—he has no idea what God has in store, he's simply doing what he knows to do to cultivate the character that God's looking for.

Today as we close, our *today's Take-WITH*:

What do you need to do to become the person that God's looking for?

No guarantees that you'll go from Pittsboro to President if you go to work on you in this way, but there's no telling what God just might do through you if you're willing to go to work ON you

What do you need to do to become the person that God's looking for?

For some of you, it's stuff that you've got to get rid of, you need to weed out some habits and some practices that you know need to go

For others of us, we're not doing anything terribly wrong, but we're not being all that intentional about doing the terribly right things, either!

This morning, as we watch what God does with a person who's committed to becoming the person that God is looking for, we're invited to trust in the God who holds our lives in his hands

AND we're invited to go to work on us to become the person that God is looking for.