

## Joseph: Endurance – Obedience Under Pressure

Spurgeon said, “Perseverance is the badge of true saints. The Christian life is not a beginning only in the ways of God, but also a continuance in the same as long as life lasts.” “Christian, it is not with you that you may persevere or not—it is not an optional blessing—you must persevere, or else all you have ever known and felt will be good for nothing to you. You must hold on your way if you are ultimately to be saved.”

Endurance is not simply something we do with our faith. Endurance is what faith does. Endurance is contained within the DNA of faith. A faith that does not endure is not faith at all. It might look like faith, like tares look like wheat, it might seem like faith, like goats can be a similar size to sheep, it might appear like faith, like soils 2 and 3 seemed like soil 4, but the difference is the difference between gold and fool's gold.

In our world of instant everything, in a culture that encourages impatience, easy-come and easy-go, transience, pragmatic results above all else, endurance seems like a foreign quality. Why would you keep obeying if it is not working out for you? Why would you keep at it if it isn't making you happier, more successful, more prosperous? That's why the church today believes in instant salvation – quick, pray this sinner's prayer, and your problems will be fixed forever! And instant Gospels produce short-lived professions of faith.

The Bible exalts enduring faith as the true faith. And sometimes, the way God shows you that you have the real deal, is when He fires His every arrow at the things men treasure, puts a blowtorch to all the temporal things, until the last thing left standing is the unquenchable, unshakable profession: I love Christ.

Joseph is one of the best examples of endurance. We have seen Joseph the truth-teller. We have seen Joseph the Spirit-filled man. We have seen Joseph resisting temptation for God alone. The question then becomes, how long will Joseph keep telling the truth, keep walking in the Spirit, keep resisting temptation? At what point will Joseph give up obeying?

Consider where his faith has got him. He lives as a faithful steward of his father's house, he speaks God's Word to his family, where does it get him? Sold into slavery – an unwanted new place, new people, new occupation – a lowly slave. He prospers there, and once again seeks to be a faithful steward, walking with God, loving the truth not only on the outside but on the inside, so he refuses the advances of Potiphar's wife. Where does that land him?

*20 Then Joseph's master took him and put him into the prison, a place where the king's prisoners were confined. And he was there in the prison.*

A false charge of rape, apparently no trial, and now on the inside of an Egyptian prison. What's worse, Potiphar probably knows Joseph is innocent. He is Pharaoh's chief executioner – if he believed this man had tried to rape his wife, he would have had him killed, probably in some particularly cruel Egyptian way. But Potiphar probably tells his wife, “Don't worry, I'll get rid of Joseph, you'll never see him again” and then makes sure he can get Joseph into a place where he will again be useful to Potiphar and his friends. As it turns out, this prison is attached to Potiphar's house. As the chief of Pharaoh's bodyguard, as the chief executioner, he would have been superintendent of the king's prison. So Potiphar hands him over to the keeper of the prison, probably so that he use him again. Potiphar has the power to have Joseph acquitted, but he is either too cowardly, or too gullible to make sure it happens. He uses Joseph.

And here Joseph foreshadows One who would also be falsely accused, also be falsely arrested, also be falsely punished. Jesus will also suffer at the hands of Gentiles, just as Joseph suffered at the hands of Gentiles. And just as Jesus would find admiration from the Centurion prosecuting His death on the Cross, so we'll see Joseph finding favour with his jailor.

Surely chapter 40 is where Joseph will snap, curse the day he was born, beg for death, and renounce his faith. Surely here is where he will snap, and bitterness will froth to the surface. Let's see what Joseph's response was.

*21 But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him mercy, and He gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison. 22 And the keeper of the prison committed to Joseph's hand all the prisoners who were in the prison; whatever they did there, it was his doing. 23 The keeper of the prison did not look into anything that was under Joseph's authority, because the LORD was with him; and whatever he did, the LORD made it prosper.*

Now why does this sound familiar? Because, it seems to be a repeat of what happened to Joseph when he arrived in Potiphar's house in chains.

Compare the accounts:

<p><i>2 The LORD was with Joseph, and he was a successful man; (Gen 39:2)</i></p> <p><i>4 So Joseph found favor in his sight, and served him (Gen 39:4)</i></p> <p><i>Then he made him overseer of his house, and all that he had he put under his authority. (Gen 39:4) 6 Thus he left all that he had in Joseph's hand, and he did not know what he had except for the bread which he ate. (Gen 39:6)</i></p> <p><i>3 And his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD made all he did to prosper in his hand. (Gen 39:3)</i></p>	<p><i>21 But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him mercy</i></p> <p><i>and He gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison.</i></p> <p><i>22 And the keeper of the prison committed to Joseph's hand all the prisoners who were in the prison; whatever they did there, it was his doing. 23 The keeper of the prison did not look into anything that was under Joseph's authority,</i></p> <p><i>because the LORD was with him; and whatever he did, the LORD made it prosper.</i></p>
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The similarities are too great to be accidental. Once again, the LORD is with Joseph. He remains Spirit-filled, submitted to God. Once again, the way he works endears him to his authorities. Once again, God adds his blessing to all Joseph does. Once again, Joseph is promoted, and entrusted with others. Put Joseph in a pit, a palace or a prison, and the thing that stays the same is Joseph's walk with God. Joseph remains Spirit-controlled.

What is the word for this? Endurance. Joseph keeps responding in the Spirit. Joseph keeps walking with God. Years later, Jacob is going to say this about Joseph: ' *23 The archers have bitterly grieved him, Shot at him and hated him. 24 But his bow remained in strength, And the arms of his hands were made strong By the hands of the Mighty God of Jacob (Gen 49:23-24)*

He has been shot at with the arrow of hatred from his brothers, attempted murder, forced removal, enslavement, false accusation, wrongful imprisonment, loss of family, loss of freedom, loss of familiarity. But with each shot, Joseph's shield of faith remains resilient. Endurance.

How long will he be this way in a prison cell? When will Joseph snap? When chapter 40 opens, Joseph has been in Egypt for eleven years. He is twenty-eight, and probably more than six of those years have been in this prison. The years of his youth are wasting away in a prison. Watch to see if Joseph continued to endure.

Genesis 40:1 It came to pass after these things that the butler and the baker of the king of Egypt offended their lord, the king of Egypt. 2 And Pharaoh was angry with his two officers, the chief butler and the chief baker. 3 So he put them in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, in the prison, the place where Joseph was confined. 4 And the captain of the guard charged Joseph with them, and he served them; so they were in custody for a while.

Joseph has been in prison for a few years already, when two new inmates are added, the king's butler and baker. Butler here is cupbearer. This was the king's right-hand man, the one who made sure the king's food was not poisoned, usually his most trusted servant – what Nehemiah would be to Artaxerxes years later. Probably a conspiracy to kill Pharaoh through poisoning had been discovered. Both of these men, who were in some way connected with the king's food were put in prison until the plot could be uncovered. So while the investigation is taking place, both of the potential conspirators are placed in the king's prison, and there they come under the stewardship of Joseph. Notice verse 3- they are placed in the house of the captain of the guard – who is that? That's Potiphar. And Potiphar charges Joseph with looking after them. Now how willing would you be to do a favour for the man who is upholding a false accusation against you, just so he can use you?

I see another picture of Christ here, as we see our Lord numbered with the transgressors, condemned alongside two criminals.

But watch now to see the state of Joseph's faith.

*5 Then the butler and the baker of the king of Egypt, who were confined in the prison, had a dream, both of them, each man's dream in one night and each man's dream with its own interpretation. 6 And Joseph came in to them in the morning and looked at them, and saw that they were sad. 7 So he asked Pharaoh's officers who were with him in the custody of his lord's house, saying, "Why do you look so sad today?" 8 And they said to him, "We each have had a dream, and there is no interpreter of it." So Joseph said to them, "Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell them to me, please."*

Now there's something rather amusing about this picture. Joseph comes to them in the morning, and apparently they were out of routine, because he says, "Why do you look so sad today?" And if it were any other person than Joseph, we'd say, "Look around you. We're not in an amusement park! We're in prison! That's how prisoners look!" But reading between the lines, we understand what is happening here. Joseph himself has joy. He is Spirit-controlled, and has found the joy of pleasing God, even in prison.

Not only so, but apparently Joseph usually brought joy to others. Joseph expects these men to be happy, which must mean his influence was one of bringing them cheer and gladness by his attitude and demeanor.

And more than that – Joseph was Spirit-filled enough to notice the pain of others. When you are filled with self-pity, wrapped up in your problems, bitter about your life, do you think you notice when someone else is sad? No. You become one of those people who ask, How are you?, and if you reply, "terrible", they respond, "Tell me about it. I know terrible. My life couldn't get worse." The person so wrapped up in self has no ministry-mindset, is not aware of others, their needs, their suffering. But Joseph is enduring in his faith, so that even here, he is Spirit-filled and ministering to others.

And then I remind you that Joseph is still a truth-teller. Here these men tell him that they have had dreams. What will that bring to mind? The dreams he had about his brothers and parents bowing down before him. Here he is in a prison, being held by the corrupt manipulation of a Gentile, whose slave he was and is. Does it look like he is anywhere close to being on a throne?

Joseph could have given up his faith in God's Word. He could have been cynical and said to these

men, “Ha! Dreams! I once had some dreams. They're false hopes, I tell you. I learnt the hard way. The real world is tough and cruel, and no use hanging on to dreams. Best advice I can give you about your dreams – don't worry about them. Forget you ever had them, because they will have no bearing on your life.”

Joseph is not cynical about the truth. He still believes God's Word. He endures in his faith that God's Word will come to pass. He endures in his faith that God is the giver of dreams like this, and the interpreter of dreams like this. He brings God into the picture, making it known that he is a servant of God, and wishes to be used by God to reveal God's Word to them.

From the pit, to Potiphar, to the prison, Joseph is still enduring. Still responding in the Spirit, still telling the truth, still trusting in God.

How do you get this kind of endurance? When we studied the book of James, we saw that endurance comes through the testing of our faith. James told us *James 1:2 My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. (Jam 1:3)* We learnt there that the way endurance cements in your life is when you keep repeating obedient responses, again and again. *Romans 5:3 And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; (Rom 5:3)*

But maybe we say, but how do I do that? It sounds like saying, you will have endurance when you endure! And that is partly what we are saying. Because this is the biblical truth: endurance is a gift from God. As faith is a gift, so endurance is a gift.

So the first thing you do in response to such a God-exalting and man-humiliating truth is to humbly pray, “God, give me endurance. Do not let me drop out of the race, 10 meters from the finish line. Deliver me from being a Demas, who has loved this present world, a second soil – shallow with no root, a third soil choked with riches and cares of this world. Lord Jesus, as you prayed that the disciples faith would not fail, pray for my faith too, let it endure!”

From Pilgrim's Progress: “Then I saw in my dream that the Interpreter took Christian by the hand, and led him into a place where was a fire burning against a wall, and one standing by it, always casting much water upon it to quench it; yet did the fire burn higher and hotter.

Then said Christian, What means this? The Interpreter answered, This fire is the work of grace that is wrought in the heart; he that casts water upon it to extinguish and put it out is the devil; but in that thou seest the fire, notwithstanding, burn higher and hotter, thou shalt also see the reason of that. So he had him about to the backside of the wall, where he saw a man with a vessel of oil in his hand, of the which he did also continually cast (but secretly) into the fire.

Then said Christian, What means this? The Interpreter answered, This is Christ, who continually, with the oil of His grace, maintains the work already begun in the heart; by the means of which, notwithstanding what the devil can do, the souls of His people prove gracious still. And in that thou sawest that the man stood behind the wall to maintain the fire: this is to teach thee, that it is hard for the tempted to see how this work of grace is maintained in the soul.

But I will suggest to you that the fuel God will use to keep the work of grace burning will be this: His promises in His Word. The promises of God, taken in by diligent meditation, reflected on, reinforced by the great hymns, prayed up to God, are the source of joyful faith when all around your soul gives way. This is the great theme of Hebrews. The saints endure not as they look around, certainly not be looking back, but by looking forward.

What has God sworn to do, swearing by His own name? **2Co 1:20** *For all the promises of God in Him are Yes, and in Him Amen, to the glory of God through us.*

And now I would have you consider, how many Scriptural promises did Joseph have? The book of

Genesis was yet to be penned. Did he know of the promise that the Father had chosen him and would not allow any to pluck him out of his hand? Did he know of the Son's promise to intercede for him, to be ever with him, to return and judge? Did he know of the Spirit's promise to seal to the day of redemption? Did he know of the promises for protection, for provision, for times of fear and doubt, for times of weakness and pain, for death itself?

Whatever fraction of promises Joseph knew through special revelation, he cherished, like a pearl of great price. Herbert Lockyer wrote a book called *All the Promises of the Bible*, and he counted 8000. Granted not all are to us, but even a tithe of that number is fuel enough for the flames in our heart. What do we do with our hoard of gold, silver, rubies, emeralds, sapphires and diamonds? To whom much is given, much shall be required.

Now the men relate their dreams to Joseph.

*9 Then the chief butler told his dream to Joseph, and said to him, "Behold, in my dream a vine was before me, 10 "and in the vine were three branches; it was as though it budded, its blossoms shot forth, and its clusters brought forth ripe grapes. 11 "Then Pharaoh's cup was in my hand; and I took the grapes and pressed them into Pharaoh's cup, and placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand." 12 And Joseph said to him, "This is the interpretation of it: The three branches are three days. 13 "Now within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your place, and you will put Pharaoh's cup in his hand according to the former manner, when you were his butler. 14 "But remember me when it is well with you, and please show kindness to me; make mention of me to Pharaoh, and get me out of this house. 15 "For indeed I was stolen away from the land of the Hebrews; and also I have done nothing here that they should put me into the dungeon."*

The butler, or the cupbearer's dream is good news. Joseph, by the power of the Spirit, interprets the images to mean that this is a prediction, just as every dream in the story of Joseph is a prediction. In three days, the butler will be exonerated in the investigation, and Pharaoh will restore him to his place. Joseph also seizes on the opportunity to ask the butler to make mention of him.

Remember, he is probably an illegal prisoner here – Potiphar has secreted him away here to use his skills. He hasn't had a trial, so he isn't serving a sentence. No one on the outside is expecting him or will try to bail him out. His only hope to ever see the light of day again is for an authority greater than Potiphar to directly bring him out. That's why this is Joseph's one chance – someone in Pharaoh's court can petition Pharaoh directly on his behalf, and he can defend his innocence.

The butler was innocent, but not so the baker. But he hoped he might also have a happy ending to his dream.

*16 When the chief baker saw that the interpretation was good, he said to Joseph, "I also was in my dream, and there were three white baskets on my head. 17 "In the uppermost basket were all kinds of baked goods for Pharaoh, and the birds ate them out of the basket on my head." 18 So Joseph answered and said, "This is the interpretation of it: The three baskets are three days. 19 "Within three days Pharaoh will lift off your head from you and hang you on a tree; and the birds will eat your flesh from you."*

Joseph is still the truth-teller. He was willing to give bad news. Egyptians wanted to be embalmed, so this prediction of being punished with hanging and then decomposing outdoors was the worst possible news for an Egyptian.

We see again a faint picture of the Lord between those two criminals – one that the Lord blessed with the news that he would be in Paradise that day, the other, who maligned him, was obviously sent to destruction.

*20 Now it came to pass on the third day, which was Pharaoh's birthday, that he made a feast for all his servants; and he lifted up the head of the chief butler and of the chief baker among his servants. 21 Then he restored the chief butler to his butlership again, and he placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand. 22 But he hanged*

*the chief baker, as Joseph had interpreted to them. 23 Yet the chief butler did not remember Joseph, but forgot him.*

You wonder how someone could forget the man who prophesied of his release. But we have all met people like this. These are the people who are fascinated with you when they meet you, but see them in a week and they have forgotten your name. Friend for a day, they love you when you are the flavour of the moment, but as soon as they have used you as a springboard to get to the next place in life, you are conveniently forgotten.

Think of Joseph's expectancy over the next days, every time he heard a key in the lock, every time he heard the door opening, expecting a message from Pharaoh, only to be dashed – just another prisoner. Potiphar has got him here illegally, it is not like Potiphar or the keeper of the prison is going to let him out. His one chance for an authority greater than Potiphar to intervene was riding on the cupbearer mentioning him to Pharaoh. But nothing. Think of the mental anguish, thinking finally, he was going to get to go home, and then as the days turned into weeks, the deep disappointment set in, and Joseph knew – he forgot me. That was probably the best hope Joseph had in the six years he has been in the prison. But now the reality sets in. He may spend the rest of his life in this prison cell, for a crime he did not commit.

And for how long did Joseph remain in that prison? For at least another two years. Another two years of looking after prisoners for Potiphar and his cronies. How do you think his dreams looked to him at that point? How did those dreams of sun and moon and stars bowing down seem to him then?

But think for a moment – what would have happened if the butler had remembered Joseph? What if he had told Pharaoh and asked Pharaoh to give this Hebrew in prison a special hearing, and allow him to plead his cause. What if Pharaoh had brought him out, heard his case, and decided to pardon him? What would Joseph have then done? He would have made his way home, back to Canaan. None of the rest of the story would have happened, had this butler not forgotten him. Chapter 40 is the next step along the path of providence through which God will get Israel into Egypt from Canaan, and back again, ready to take Canaan from the Amorites, whose sins will by then be full.

It's that perspective on God's sovereignty that filled Joseph's mind, as we find out in chapter 50, when he says to his brothers, that all this suffering was meant by them for evil, but God meant it for good. Joseph believed in the promises of God. Joseph had received a dream that said someday, in some way, he would be in a place of authority. He didn't have to know how. He didn't have to engineer it. His part was to believe the promises of God, and endure in obedience. That's why we sing

*How firm a foundation you saints of the Lord,  
is laid for your faith in his excellent Word!  
What more can he say than to you he has said,  
to you who for refuge to Jesus have fled?*