

Horsley Evangelical Church (www.horsleyec.org.uk)

Minister Rev Ken McIntosh 11th July 2021

Genesis 40 Joseph in Prison

Joseph's time in prison was perhaps the lowest point in his life. At the beginning of his story we meet a young man, considered to be his father's firstborn and given a position of leadership over eleven brothers. But Joseph's fortunes soon take a nose dive. His brothers hate him and sell him to Ishmaelites traders who take him down to Egypt.

After a brief time of success in Potiphar's house, Joseph again experiences hatred and betrayal, this time from the wife of Potiphar. She propositions Joseph repeatedly, but Joseph resists her. Eventually she lies to her husband, accusing Joseph of attempted rape. And Potiphar must be seen to do the right thing, so he sends Joseph to the jail where the king's prisoners are kept.

And this is where we find Joseph in our story today. In prison as a slave in a foreign land. And not only that, but he must also serve the other prisoners. Here is arguably the lowest point in Joseph's life. He has suffered injustice. He is despised and rejected, a man familiar with suffering. He is the slave of prisoners in a foreign jail, moreover his father thinks he is dead.

Humanly speaking there is no way up from here. Humanly speaking Joseph has no hope. We might think that if ever God gave a man over, then it was Joseph. Except that is *not* the case. Outward circumstances can be deceiving. For God has not abandoned Joseph at all. Indeed Joseph's steps down are really God's steps *forward* in his plan to do amazing things through this man— as we shall see.

Let's look at this part of God's word under three headings. First in verses 1-8 we have **Joseph's kindness**. But to whom does Joseph show kindness? **Read verses 1-8a**. To whom does Joseph show kindness? His kindness is shown to the chief cupbearer and baker of the king of Egypt, who were also in prison.

It's almost a throwaway line, "Why are your faces so sad today?" (7) but it gives us a little window into Joseph's attitude in the prison. As he brings these men their early morning cup of tea, Joseph notices that they both looked dejected. And he asks them what is wrong. Isn't that amazing! That *Joseph* should have asked *them* what was wrong, given his own situation. But it tells us about the *attitude* Joseph had in the prison and to the work assigned to him. There was even a *cheerfulness* about him. He notices the countenance of both men and asks them what is wrong!

How can we account for such an attitude? The answer is found at the end of chapter 39. **Read 39:20-21**. Here is the answer. Joseph was able to show kindness to these two men in prison because each day he knew the kindness of the Lord. In all his distress, the Lord had comforted Joseph. Not only had the Lord granted Joseph favour in the eyes of the prison warden but we read that the Lord was with him in prison. It means that in the dungeon Joseph knew a special communion with the Lord. The Lord was near him. God's light entered Joseph's darkness. The Lord revealed his love to Joseph and gave him his joy.

And therefore in spite of outwardly grim circumstances, Joseph flourished spiritually and was able to show kindness to others – the same kindness the Lord had shown to him. And isn't that the Christian's story. In spite of outward trials and difficulties we know the Lord is with us. We know something of his love and joy. His presence changes all things, and we are able to show kindness to others.

Incidentally, did we notice who assigned these two men - the chief cupbearer and baker to Joseph's special care? Not the prison warden but – **read verse 4**. And who is the captain of the guard? **Read 39:1**. It was none other than Potiphar who assigned Joseph the task of looking after these two men. This further suggests that Potiphar *knew* Joseph was innocent of the charges made against him by his wife. The cupbearer and baker were very important men – they were not mere domestic servants. Potiphar would have known this and would want to keep in their favour.

So who does Potiphar assign to their special care? Joseph. Potiphar knew Joseph's abilities in administration. But he also knew Joseph's character. The Lord had been with Joseph in Potiphar's house. And Joseph had shown the same kindness to others in Potiphar's house.

So Joseph had been a good witness in Potiphar's house, just as he had been a good witness in the jail. And isn't this what happens when a Christian walks with the Lord each day? Not only do we know his presence, not only do we know his blessing, but we become his witnesses in the world. And our relationship with him overflows to others, to the praise of his name. One of the best definitions of evangelism I know is simply 'overflow'. Evangelism is overflowing Jesus to others.

Then in verses 8-22 we have **Joseph's faith**. It's particularly verse 8 which give us another little window into Joseph's life – this time at his faith in the Lord. **Read verse 8**. Joseph's faith. The story of Joseph has three pairs of dreams. The third pair we shall see next week – the pair of dreams God gave Pharaoh. The first pair of dreams we heard a couple of weeks ago – the dreams God gave Joseph about his family bowing down to him. But now we hear the middle pair of dreams – those given by God to the cupbearer and baker in prison.

But why did these dreams make them look so dejected in the morning? Were they nightmares? No, it was because there was no one in the prison to interpret the dreams. In Egyptian culture it was believed that the gods spoke to men through dreams. And a whole science had developed whereby people claimed to be able to interpret dreams. Books were written on the subject. It was big business. If you had a dream and wanted to find out what the gods were saying to you, you consulted a 'dream expert'. And for a fee they were able to interpret your dream.

But the trouble was, there were no such dream experts in the prison. And so these men were not able to understand what the gods were saying to them – at a time when they were desperate to find out their fate. But Joseph's reply shows us his faith in the Lord. First he tells them. "Do not interpretations belong to God?"

Joseph knew there was but one God – the Lord, the sovereign God. And therefore all interpretations of dreams belong to him. The Lord was great. He knew all things – even he thoughts of men. And the Lord knew the future, indeed he controlled the future. Therefore all interpretations belonged to God. If God gave the dream, he was also able to give the meaning of the dream.

Now does this mean that all dreams are messages from God? No it doesn't. God controls all our dreaming, but that doesn't mean every time we have a dream then the Lord is trying to say something to us. Every dream does *not* have a 'meaning'. In fact we would have to say that *most* dreams do not have meanings from God. You've just had too much cheese! No, if we want to know God and his will and guidance then we look to God's word, the Bible.

But clearly *some* dreams *do* have a meaning from God. And the dreams we read of in the story of Joseph do have a meaning. But Joseph knows that the meaning of dreams does not belong to men and the science of *oneiromancy* - but only to the sovereign Lord.

But then secondly, by faith, Joseph says –“ Tell me your dream”. By faith Joseph knew the Lord would give *him* the interpretation of these dreams. Joseph knew by faith that the Lord would tell him their meaning. And so he invites the two men to tell him what they dreamt.

But that raises an interesting question: had the Lord revealed to Joseph the meaning of his own dreams in chapter 37? Had the Lord revealed to Joseph that this prison was not the end of the road but that in fact his family *would* yet bow down to him? Did Joseph therefore know by faith that he would be released from prison some day? I think it probably does.

And so what follows tells us that God does have the interpretation of dreams (dreams at least which have a meaning). But it also tells us that God had been pleased to reveal to Joseph the fact that he would be released from prison one day.

So what were these dreams? Cupbearer first. **Read verse 9-13**. Then later we see that the interpretation was correct – **read verse 20, 21**. Joseph was able to give the meaning of the dream. But then there was the other man’s dream. **Read verse 16-19**. And then we see how this interpretation was also correct. **Read verse 22**.

Both men were in prison probably because Pharaoh had become ill, and it was suspected that someone had poisoned him. An attempt on the king’s life may have come from poisoning either his food or his drink, and hence these two men were primes suspects. But when their case comes before the officials at Pharaoh’s birthday party, the consensus is that the poisoning had come from the *food* not the wine. Hence the demise of the chief baker.

But Joseph was courageous in giving the baker the true interpretation of his dream. Joseph may have been tempted to give the baker a more favourable but false interpretation. After all, Joseph did not know how the baker might react to this bad news. But Joseph was faithful to God, even when that faithfulness might have caused him suffering. We’ve seen this faithfulness before when Joseph gave his father a true report of his brothers’ activity – even when it was a bad report. Also when he gave his family a faithful rendering of his own pair of dreams. In both cases Joseph knew he would probably suffer for doing so. Nevertheless he put God first. And this is what we see here as Joseph gives the baker the difficult truth about his own future - not knowing how this man would react.

It’s a reminder to us that at times we need to be brave and trust God when we have to give people bad news about their future. You’re asked if you think all people will go to heaven. You are tempted to say ‘yes’, and yet you need to tell people the truth. ‘Only those trust in the Saviour Jesus Christ, will go to heaven’ is the answer. But that won’t make you popular! Then you are asked whether you believe there is a hell? And you are tempted to say ‘no’ - but the truth is ‘yes’. ‘All who do not know the Lord Jesus Christ as Saviour will go to a lost eternity in hell.’ Like Joseph we need to be faithful to the revelation of God and trust God with the outcome.

Joseph’s kindness, Joseph’s faith and then finally in verse 23 **Joseph’s patience**. **Read verse 23**. That verse takes us back to verses 14 and 15. **Read verse 14, 15**. Then again – **read verse 23 and 41:1a**. It’s one of the long *waits* in the Bible. And it required great patience from Joseph. Was Joseph wrong to say what he said to the chief cupbearer – “Remember me to Pharaoh”? Some say he was. They say that Joseph should have simply waited for God’s way and God’s time in releasing him from the prison.

But surely that is not right. It was *not* wrong for Joseph to ask the chief cup bearer to remember him before Pharaoh. God had indeed brought these two men into the prison to hear Joseph’s interpretation of their dreams. Joseph was right in thinking that the Lord would use this man to get him out of prison. Like

the baker, this man had the ear of the king. It was part of the providence of God that Joseph met these man. The cup bearer would be the key to releasing Joseph from prison. So it was not wrong for Joseph to make this request.

But why did Joseph have to wait two years before he was remembered and then released? The simple answer is that we do not know. But what we do know is that Joseph had to wait God's timing. Perhaps Joseph have to learn not to trust in men but only the Lord.

No doubt the cupbearer gave Joseph various assurances that he would speak to Pharaoh on his behalf. If he ever got out, if Joseph's prediction came true, the very first time the cupbearer saw the king he would be sure to tell him of the amazing man in the prison who could interpret dreams! How valuable such a man would be to Pharaoh. And so, as some suggest, Joseph was watching the cell door in the early days. Every time it opened he would say, "This is it – time to get out". Perhaps he had his case packed and his hat and coat on, just waiting for the day when the door would open and there would be his old friend, the cupbearer, with good news.

But when the days became weeks and the weeks months, Joseph realised that either the man had not kept his promise or else he did not have the influence over the king he thought he had.

Perhaps there were other reasons why the Lord had to detain his servant in prison. Reasons we do not understand. But we believe that the Lord was doing an important work in Joseph's life during that time. In fact many say that during those two years the *most important* work was done in Joseph's life, preparing him for his future role.

Whatever we may say, we know that the Lord's timing is best. We also know that we have to be patient during times in our lives when like Joseph we cannot understand God's delay in answering our prayer. For we all know what it is to be in God's 'waiting room', so to speak. When we have to wait for that marriage partner, for that child to be conceived, for that new job to come, for those school places to be given, for the correct diagnosis of my illness to be given, and even when we are simply waiting to go to home to heaven and can't understand why the Lord would detain us any longer in the waiting cell of this world.

And yet the Lord is at work in our lives during such times. Like Joseph, it's best not to complain. Like Joseph, it's best not to become bitter. Better to wait upon the Lord and keep trusting in him rather than in man. Man either forgets what he has promised or else he does not have the influence he imagines himself to have. What does the Scripture tell us? [Read Proverbs 3:5,6](#). [Psalm 146:3, 5-6](#).

If you are in the waiting room today, trust in the Lord. He is not finished his work in this part of your life. Trust that his timing is best. I mean, think of the long time after the sin of Adam in the garden until the coming of the Saviour! But what does the Scripture say? [Read Galatians 4:4, 5](#). And then again what does the Scripture say about God's power to keep you in such times of waiting – [read Isaiah 40:29-31](#).

Joseph's kindness. Let the Lord's kindness to you overflow to others this week. **Joseph's faith.** The Lord has revealed much more to us through his word the Bible than he ever revealed to Joseph. Let us believe his word and share it with others. **Joseph's patience.** What are you having to be patient about today? Keep trusting in the Lord and looking to him.