

Genesis

God At Work In Joseph's Prison Tragedy Chapter 40

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Introduction

As we turn to the 40th chapter of Genesis we are taken into the dungeon of Joseph's prison tragedy. The end of chapter 39, tells us how Joseph wound up in prison and it gives us an overview of his experience but chapter 40 gives us some important details of what it was like for him in prison. And the most important detail was that God was working in Joseph's favor while he spent years in prison. This point was stressed for us when we came to the end chapter 39 by twice stating "...*the LORD was with Joseph...*"

On the surface were Joseph lived, it would not have appear that God was doing anything to get him out of prison but what I am going to demonstrate for you is that God, was in fact, more active at a deeper level in Joseph's life while he was in prison then when he was at home with his family or serving in Potiphar's home. What is a tragedy is that an innocent man went to prison, what is extraordinary is that while he was in prison God was with him, working in his favor.

There are three aspects of God's work presented to us here and they are connected to His nature and they are as follows: His providence, His omniscience, and His sovereignty. Each of these aspects of God's nature were specifically used to work in Joseph's favor and thus, demonstrates that "...*the LORD was with Joseph...*"

Now, what I want to do, is look at each of these characteristics of God to see how they worked in Joseph's life so that we might use his story as a life lesson to help us navigate the tragedies of our lives.

1. The providence of God was at work positioning Joseph for his destiny (vv.1-4).

Before we address the details of these verses I want to remind you what the providence of God is so that we are all on the same page. When we studied chapter 37, I titled it, *Joseph A Man Of Providence*. In my introduction to the chapter I gave you an extensive look at what the providence of God is. If you go back to that chapter it might be helpful to you if you have never heard the term. But for now I will simply note for you that the word **providence** in association with God **speaks to God's governing over all His creation through His foreknowledge and foreordaining everything to work out for His glorious purpose.**

The Providence of God highlights at least two things about God:

- First it teaches us that that God is not distant and emotionally disconnected from His creation but intimately involved in all the real affairs of life maintaining them and directing them to fulfill His purposes. This is highlighted throughout the entire Bible in various ways but it especially seen in the opening chapters of Genesis.
 - When God created the world all three persons of the trinity were personally involved (Gen.1:1-3).
 - When God created the natural world He fashioned it with the breath of His own words.
 - When God created man, He did it in such a way that men would reflect His own image.
 - When He made a woman for Adam, He fashioned her in such a way that she would reflect God's image and be attractive to the man.
 - When God brought Adam and Eve together He gave them the gift of marriage and told them to make babies so there would be more images of God in the world.

- When Adam and Eve sinned God didn't walk away from them He came after them.
- When Adam and Eve's first son carried the thought of murder in his heart God didn't avoid him, He came after Cain and tried to help him.
- When humanity had turned into savages, God didn't steer clear of them, He sent Noah to testify of God's coming judgment and had him do that for 120yrs.

We could go on and on but we don't need to because the point is made. God is intimately acquainted, with all the affairs of his creation and working within the creation to unfold a glorious plan, thus He is providentially working these things out.

- The second, thing the Providence of God reveals about God is this, God is Lord over all. This means He has no equal and that He does as He pleases for His own good purposes and pleasure.
 - In Isaiah 55:8-9, God Himself tells us why He hold this prerogative, "*For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways,*" declares the Lord. 9 "*For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways And My thoughts than your thoughts.*" What in part God was communicating is how transcendent and incomprehensible He is. He is beyond our reach, intellectually, spiritually, physically, and emotionally. It is true that we know some things about God but only because He has revealed those things to us. And the things the Scripts tell us about Him are only scratching the surface of who He is.
 - The Apostle Paul beautifully highlighted the Lordship of God in this way, Rom. 11:33-34 "*Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! 34 For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? 35 Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to him again? 36 For*

from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.”

When we speak of the Providence of God it is a big concept bears down on us with the weight of God’s Kingship over our lives. And when we take this big concept and reduce it down to one man’s life, that is to say Joseph, we are able to see how this realistically worked out for him and thereby, get some idea of how God’s Providence might be working in our lives and thereby find it well worth our time.

Now as this chapter opens we are confronted with two men who held two different titles. You will notice in v.1 we have “...*the cupbearer and the baker for the king of Egypt.*” The Bible doesn’t assign names to them because they are not important, it is their title’s that are important to Joseph’s story. In our culture, we are very unfamiliar with such positions. In fact, if we were to lay our cultural viewpoint onto the positions these two men held, we would consider them sort of low level servants but that would be a huge mistake.

These two men were royal officials in pharaoh palace. The Cupbearer and the Baker were responsible for pharaoh's life. They had charge over the cleanliness and quality of the kings food. In Egypt, the cupbearer was also called “**pure hands**,” which spoke of how the man that held this position had to be a man of high integrity. And the Baker was sometimes referred to as the “**royal table scribe**” because he was in charge of the food that went to the kings table. These positions would've been considered, highly noble, and the men that would've served in them would've been personally close to Pharaoh.

Now this is very important to Joseph’s story. He is going to be put in contact with men that held high ranking positions to the most important man in Egypt. These men walked in the place, worked for Pharaoh, and managed some of the most important affairs of the king but Joseph didn't know any of this when he was put into prison. And he had no idea that meeting these two men was going to change the rest of his life. In one way we could say that Joseph met them in the ordinariness of his every day experience, but his meeting them was going to have a profound influence upon him. **This is the providence of God at work in Joseph’s life.**

Let's consider a few things to emphasize this point:

- First, underline in your Bible the first 7 words in v.1, "*Then it came about after these things...*" Note how this presents a timing issue to the story. **God's providence has everything to do with His timing.** Joseph found himself in prison:
 - after he had been falsely accused,
 - after he had been sold as a slave to Potiphar,
 - after his brother's sold him to traders,
 - and after his brother plotted to kill him.

In other words, there were a series of events in Joseph's life that brought him to prison, and at the same time those things were happening, in Pharaoh's Palace there were another series of events, taking place in the lives of two men, the cupbearer and the baker that would collide with Joseph's tragic circumstances. And what the first 7 words of chapter 40 indicates to us is this, years ago when Joseph's troubles first started, God was also at work directing the lives of other men to set the stage for them to meet Joseph in prison. *Have you ever been in a car accident? If you have you know what the feeling is like when stop and think to yourself, what were the odds of me coming down the road at the exact same time this other person was. While was getting ready for the day and getting in my car that other person was doing the something and we ended up at the same point in a car accident.* Someone says that is *happenstance*, I say that's the Providence of God. It was no accident that Joseph ran into these two men, God was at work in this.

- Secondly, we want to notice the king's anger is what made this meeting between Joseph and the royal officials possible, vv.1-3, "*Then it came about after these things, the cupbearer and the baker for the king of Egypt offended their lord, the king of Egypt. 2 Pharaoh was furious with his two officials, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker. 3 So he put them in confinement in the house of the captain of the bodyguard, in the jail, the same place where Joseph was imprisoned.*" Now we don't know what these two men did to so up set the king but that is not important to the story, what is important is that the king sent them to the same "*place where Joseph was imprisoned.*" Someone might say, "*What a coincidence*" but that was no coincidence, it was the providence of God at work in Joseph's life.

Pharaoh could have sent those men anywhere he wanted or could have had them both killed immediately but he didn't, he sent them to the prison where Joseph was, not knowing who Joseph was. Here we see the application of Prov.21:1 "*The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it wherever He wishes.*" In this instance what we have is the will of the king of Egypt being directed by the sovereign will of God Almighty. In other words God's Lordship trumps Pharaoh's.

- Thirdly, we want to pay attention to who the cupbearer and the baker were sent to, vv.3-4, "*So he put them in confinement in the house of the captain of the bodyguard, in the jail, the same place where Joseph was imprisoned. 4 The captain of the bodyguard put Joseph in charge of them, and he took care of them; and they were in confinement for some time.*" Those men were specifically sent to "*the captain of the bodyguard*" and if we turn back to chapter 39, v.1 we discover this was none other than Potiphar, "*Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt; and Potiphar, an Egyptian officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the bodyguard, bought him....*" Someone might say, "*What a coincidence,*" yes what a coincidence these two men just happen to be sent to the same jail that was run by Potiphar, Joseph's old master. Of all the officials in Egypt which were at the king's beckon call he called upon Potiphar to take care of his problem, which in turn put the royal officials in Joseph's lap.
- Fourthly, we need to notice that Joseph was specifically put in charge of these two men, v.4 "*The captain of the bodyguard put Joseph in charge of them, and he took care of them...*" Why would Joseph be put in charge of these men, it was due to their rank in Pharaoh's place. The captain of the bodyguard would want to treat them as well as he could because he knew that it would be very probable that Pharaoh would change his mind and call for them to be returned. Thus, the captain would have careful to care for them. And who would be the best person for the job, Joseph. You will remember that Joseph had risen in rank in the prison system as noted in Gen. 39:22-23 "*The chief jailer committed to Joseph's charge all the prisoners who were in the jail; so that whatever was done there, he was responsible*

for it. 23 The chief jailer did not supervise anything under Joseph's charge because the Lord was with him; and whatever he did, the Lord made to prosper." Now this presents an interesting twist to the Providence of God that is important for us to understand. As much as God showed favor toward Joseph (39:21), Joseph had to do his part by working unto God, other wise he would have never been appointed to the place where he would be the natural choice to care for the royal inmates. So what we discover here is how the Providence of God does short circuit man's responsibility. They work together in a strange way that is impossible for us to square with the natural world but in God's economy. It works perfectly as he is never frustrated by man's choices..

When we honestly look at these supposed "coincidences" and see them through the lens of Joseph's entire story, what you have to conclude is that God allowed men to make their decisions but He used them to providentially move them on the chess board of life to bring about His desired outcome.

Now we have to be mindful of this when we read this story, Joseph would not have understood these things as we do because he was living them out in real time. To him, these two guys would have been just more work for him. They would have added to his normal day to day drudgery of living in the solitariness of prison. But in the Providence of God, these two men were sent to Joseph to have a profound impact upon his life.

What we ought learn from Joseph's circumstance is how we must be very careful about how we think about our day to day ordinary lives. It is out of the ordinariness of life some of our most profound turning points come into play. And it should stress to us that the smallest events in our lives can have some to the most far reaching meaning to us and others. An old anglican pastor from many years ago by the name of **W. H. Griffith Thomas**, drove this point home when he said, "...we do not really know the profound significance of many of the simplest details of daily life. Happy is the man whose eye is open to see the hand of God in ever-day events, for to him life always possesses a wonderful and true joy and glory."¹

¹ Thomas, W. H. Griffith, Genesis A Devotional Commentary, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Eerdmans Publishing, 1957, pp. 379-380.

You see, when we look at life through the lens of God's Providence we live with the confidence (hope) that every event has a purpose. Therefore, the tragedies of life should not debilitate us when we have our eye on the providence of God. For a child of God there is no such thing as happenstance only Providence.

2. The omniscience of God was at work providing Joseph with future knowledge (vv.5-19).

The omniscience of God is something that I need to define for you before we can unpack vv.5-19. For in those verses we see Joseph's dependence on God's omniscience and His willingness to share with Joseph what He knew would happen.

If the omniscience of God is not taken into consideration one conclude Joseph got lucky with his interpretation. Or, that he was some kind of a mentalist or mind reader who simply used the power of suggestion to pretend to interpret the dreams. **I remember years ago watching an entertainer by the name of The Amazing Kreskin who I used to come on the Johnny Carson show to do his shtick and made people think he could read their minds to know things about them but he was just very good at using the power of suggestion and reading people.** Joseph was not that kind of a guy, he was a man who had a great faith in God's ability to know all things. He would not have used the word omniscience to define it as we do today but that is what he was placing his trust in.

The word omniscience is a compound word, omni = all, science = knowledge and when it is used in connection to the God of the Bible it means that **God knows everything there is to know.** Now that is a very simple definition to a very complex subject and it needs a bit of an explanation. I want you to know that there have been volumes of books written on this subject but my intention is to highlight for you just a few of the matters connected to the omniscience of God to hopefully help you appreciated the scope of God's knowledge and to see how glorious it is to be in a personal love relationship with one who knows everything about you and in spite of that chooses to love you in Christ. And then with that understanding we will dig into vv.5-19, to see how the omniscience worked in Joseph favor.

First, I think it would be helpful for us to begin with a quote from **A.W. Tozer** trying to define the omniscience of God in his classic work, *The Knowledge Of The Holy*. Tozer wrote this, “God knows instantly and effortlessly all matter and all matters, all mind and every mind, all spirit and all spirits, all being and every being, all creaturehood and all creatures, every plurality and all pluralities, all law and every law, all relations, all causes, all thoughts, all mysteries, all enigmas, all feeling, all desires, every unuttered secret, all thrones and dominions, all personalities, all things visible and invisible in heaven and in earth, motion, space, time, life, death, good, evil, heaven, and hell.

Because God knows all things perfectly, He knows no thing better than any other thing, but all things equally well. He never discovers anything, He is never surprised, never amazed. He never wonders about anything nor (except when drawing men out for their own good) does He seek information or ask questions.”² You can see with this definition the subject of God’s omniscience is no small matter but if I could put it in a succinct way, I could say it this way, ***the God of the Bible has absolute knowledge of everything and perfectly understands everything about that knowledge.***

The implications of God's omniscience means at least five things:

- **First, God knows everything that is real and every possibility that never happens.**
 - God knows everything that actually, took place, takes place and will take place in the future. In His omniscience He knows everything:
 - ✓ That took place in the past, Prov.24:12 “*See, we did not know this, Does He not consider it who weighs the hearts? And does He not know it who keeps your soul? And will He not render to man according to his work?*”
 - ✓ That takes place in the present, Jer. 32:19 “*great in counsel and mighty in deed, whose eyes are open to all the ways of the sons of*

² Tozer, A. W., *The Knowledge Of The Holy*, Harper San Francisco Pub., 1961, p.56.

men, giving to everyone according to his ways and according to the fruit of his deeds”; Prov. 15:3 “The eyes of the Lord are in every place, Watching the evil and the good.”

- ✓ That will take place in the future, Is. 46:10 *“Declaring the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things which have not been done, Saying, ‘My purpose will be established, And I will accomplish all My good pleasure”*

When we speak of God’s knowledge of the past, present and future we are addressing everything that actually takes place but we also need to add to this that God know all the possibilities.

- The possibilities are things that God knows are capable of existing or occurring but never do because He has not ordered them so.
 - ✓ Prior to becoming King, David was hunted by Saul and thus David had a question for God, 1 Sam. 23:12 *“Then David said, “Will the men of Keilah surrender me and my men into the hand of Saul?” And the Lord said, “They will surrender you.”*
 - ✓ In the gospel of Matthew we find Jesus pronouncing “*wow*” judgments on certain cities that rejected Him and mentions other cities that would have welcomed Him if He had gone there, Matt. 11:21-23 *“21 “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. 22 “Nevertheless I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you. 23 “And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You will descend to Hades; for if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day.”*

You see there isn't anything real or possible that God doesn't know about. But that is not the only thing we need to know about God's omniscience. He does have the knowledge of everything real and possible and He knows everything completely.

- **Second, God knows everything there is to know about everything. He has full and complete knowledge about everything.**

- He knows the nature of all things
- He knows they are composed
- He knows the condition they are in
- He knows where everything is
- He knows what everything is doing
- He knows what everything needs
- He knows the relationship between all things

Ps. 147:5 "*Great is our Lord and abundant in strength; His understanding is infinite.*"

There isn't anything that God doesn't understand, He is the quintessential expert on everything there is to know. And that's not all. As He has perfect knowledge about everything, He has it without assistance of anything.

- **Third, God knows everything without assistance.**

He has no need of learning about anything. He doesn't need to receive information from another source to understand something. He has no need to be taught anything or to be informed about any matter. Is. 40:13-14 "*Who has directed the Spirit of the Lord, Or as His counselor has informed Him? 14 With whom did He consult and who gave Him understanding? And who taught Him in the path of justice and taught Him knowledge*

And informed Him of the way of understanding?”

God never has an “*Ah ha*” moment? He is not like the scientist in the laboratory who suddenly realizes he is discovered some great thing in nature. Because of God’s omniscience He is never surprised about anything but that’s not all. In having all this knowledge, God knows everything at the same time and instantaneously.

- **Fourth, God knows everything at the same time and instantaneously.**

He knows the totality of every detail about everything simultaneously. In the book of Acts, James one of the leaders in the Jerusalem, church was addressing the how God had predicted in the Old Testament how He would call out from among the Gentiles His church and he quoted from the prophet Amos to make his point. This is what he said Acts 15:13-18 “*After they had stopped speaking, James answered, saying, “Brethren, listen to me. 14 “Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name. 15 “With this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written, 16 ‘After these things I will return, And I will rebuild the tabernacle of David which has fallen, And I will rebuild its ruins, And I will restore it, 17 So that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, And all the Gentiles who are called by My name,’ 18 Says the Lord, who makes these things known from long ago.”* You see, God was able to “...make these things known from long ago” because in His omniscience He had perfect knowledge instantaneously of the future. He did have to wait for the future to unfold He has perfect knowledge of it right now but that not all, God knows everything innately.

- **Fifth, God knows everything innately**

Whenever we talk about the omniscience of God, we inevitably speak of it, in the sense of a characteristic of God's nature. And in doing so, we naturally see it through the lens of characteristics of our own nature but that would not be comparing apple for apples. In our case, our life is derived from outside of us, in God’s case His life comes from within Himself. He was never created, thus His knowledge is not something that came to Him or He had to acquire it but is eternally inherently in Him. The God of the Bible is absolute and perfect knowledge and we call this omniscience.

Now, when you think of the omniscience of God through this lens and we turn to Gen. 40:8 and Joseph says, "...*Do not interpretations belong to God?*..." he is leaning into the omniscience of God. Because God knows everything about everything certainly He would know what the royal officials dreams were and what they meant. But if your not careful you can read right by this and miss the beauty and magnificent of God's omniscience going to work in a prison on Joseph's behalf. Now with this background on God's omissions we can unpack vv. 5-19.

a. Two dreams create a problem

As we move into the details of the story we need to keep in mind that this particular day was a mile stone for Joseph. God had given Joseph two dreams when he was seventeen confirming that Joseph would rise above his father and brothers. To a point were they would bow to his authority over them. Shortly after those dreams, Joseph's life went from bad to worse. The school of faith for Joseph took his life on a trajectory to prison. And by the time he meets the cupbearer and the baker he was looking for any opportunity to get out of prison (v.14). What Joseph could have never realized was how God had providentially initiated the first steps to not only get Joseph out of prison but to lift to the height of a world leader, second only to the most powerful king of the known world. What jumps out at us at this point is how we need to be very careful how we judge our circumstances. What might seem to be just an ordinary day in prison could be the next step to God's greatest blessings. This moment in Joseph's life would have held such importance to Moses' original audience, who had been enslaved for four centuries and now were on the precipice of going into the land of milk and honey as God had promised them. And I imagine that there is someone within the sound of my voice who feels incarcerated in the circumstances of life. To that individual I want you to know, today maybe the day God begins to initiate some of His greatest blessings in your life. Never forget that God has us all in the school of faith, providentially, omnisciently, and sovereignly helping us to grow in our faith so that we would ultimately come to prize our relationship with Him more than anything else.

So here we find Joseph in the school of faith, in prison taking the next steps to Pharaoh's palace. He had been in prison for years by the time we come to vv. 5-7. We read that on one particular night both Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker had dreams that

caused them to be visible down hearted. Now there was a reason for this, in their Egyptian culture dreams held great significance because they believed that dreams put one in contact with the supernatural world. And they also believed that when dreams came in pairs they would absolutely be fulfillment. For an Egyptian living in Joseph's day this would have been exciting except for fact that they believed only certain people had the ability to interpret dreams. They were professional dream interpreters (Deut. 13:1-5) who keep records of peoples dreams. They keep what was known as a *dream book*. Whenever someone would have a dream they would turn to the *dream book* to interpret the symbolism of the dreams. The cupbearer and the baker were sad because in prison they had no access to a professional interpreter. You see in their world this was a serious issue for them to hear from the supernatural world and to believe that whatever the dreams meant was going to happen, therefore they were very sad. **And as a bit of a side-bar I think it is interesting to note that Scripturally, only Joseph and Daniel were used as interpreters of dreams. And both of them were under the rule of foreign kings who worshipped false gods and who had professional interpreters available to them.**³ And what this demonstrates is that when God desires He is going to use a pagan nation for His special purposes He can send His servants into that culture and uniquely use their own pagan practices to accomplish His plans to magnify His own glory. When we consider this aspect of God's providential sovereignty it should help us to be at ease in the cultural revolution we are living in today. God has a plan and He is fully capable of bring His plan together.

b. Joseph responds to the problem

What we have in vv.6-7 is Joseph's response to his fellow inmates problem. And it is in his response to them that we can see the omniscience of God and we get a glimpse of the character qualities that God was developing in Joseph in the school of faith. You see, when adversity hits our lives it really brings to the surface what kind of people we really are at the core of our being. And it exposes what kind of faith we really possess and it was no different for Joseph. What we discover in the following verses was how Joseph's prison tragedy really refined and elevated his character for leadership. And in that light lets make a couple of important observations.

³ Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, [Ariel's Bible Commentary: The Book of Genesis](#), 1st ed. (San Antonio, TX: Ariel Ministries, 2008), 556–557.

i. **First, I want to draw your attention to Joseph’s sympathetic heart toward others who were hurting.**

Notice what vv.6-7 says, “*When Joseph came to them in the morning and observed them, behold, they were dejected. 7 He asked Pharaoh’s officials who were with him in confinement in his master’s house, “Why are your faces so sad today?”* What is significant here is the question that Joseph asked, “...*Why are your faces so sad today?”* With all the unfair things that had happened in Joseph’s life up to this point, and living in prison with the low of the low, **Joseph had developed a tender heart for the concerns of others.** A lesser man would allow his circumstances to harden his heart, we see just the opposite in Joseph. A key quality of a good leader is that he has a sympathy heart toward others who are emotionally hurting. This kind of a leadership quality is most perfectly demonstrated in the Lord Jesus life. There are many instances we can point to:

- In John 3, when a Pharisee by the Nicodemus was struggling with his own faith in Christ, Jesus listened to him and then gave him the answer to his problem, v.3 “...*you must be born-again...*” Jesus didn’t shrug him off because he was a Pharisee, a group of men that wanted to kill Jesus, He carried about his spiritual struggle and gave him what he needed to resolve the issue.
- In John 4, read that when Jesus was traveling to Galilee he purposed to go through Samaria (v.3-4), a place that Jews despised but not Jesus. He knew there was going to be a Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well that was emotionally wounded from all the failed relationships she had had with men over the years. Jesus found her and offered her the solution to her problem drink from the *living water* (v.10). V.11 “...*whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life.*” Jesus saw the heart of a

woman who's heart was locked up because of her sin and he cared about it.

- In John 5, Jesus saw a man who had been 38yrs in his sickness He went to the man to help him v.6 tells us, "*when Jesus saw him lying there, and knew that he had already been a long time in that condition, He said to him, 'Do you wish to get well?'*" And when the man responded that he had been trying to fix his condition but no one would help him, Jesus said (v.8) "*...Arise, take up your pallet, and walk...*"
- In John 6, Jesus saw thousands of people who were hungry because they had been following Him all day long. Others would have sent them on their way, Jesus was sympathetic to their need and He told His disciples to "*...Have the people sit down*" (v.10) and He fed them.
- In John 11, one of Jesus best friends had died. He could have sent a message to His friends sisters, whom Jesus was also friends with and said that He was really busy with the ministry but He went to them to help them with their problem and when He got there He addressed their problem by raising Lazarus from the dead. Thereby proving that He is the "*...resurrection and the life...*" (v.25).
- And lastly, we learn in the book of Hebrews how Jesus serve all who are born-again as their sympathetic High Priest, 4:15 -16 "*For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. 16 Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*"

One of the marks of great leadership is the ability to have a heart for the pain or problems of others. This is vitally important especially for one who has charge over large masses of people. The larger the group the leader is responsible for

the easier it is to lose sight of the individual need. Joseph was going to be in charge of the administration of the most powerful nation on the planet, he needed to learn to have a heart that would sympathize with another's pain and the best way for him to learn this was to have personally experienced pain in his own life. The tragedies of life is often God's tool to forge the character of godly leaders. **In my own life, I never knew what depression was until it struck me one day and I learned how debilitating it was. Now when I come in contact with people who suffer from depression I find that my heart is tender toward them and I want to help them if I can.** Kent Hughes had a very good comment on this as he reflected on Joseph, **"Through his life experiences, Joseph had been developing a redemptive edge. A sympathetic resonance for others weld in his soul. He knew where other people were, and how they felt, and he cared. A great leader was emerging."**⁴

ii. The second quality about Joseph's character I want to draw your attention to is how he never forsook God as the center of his life.

When a lesser man goes through tragedies he will subtly and sometimes not so subtle abandon their relationship with God but this was not the case with Joseph. When the men said that they had no one to interpret their dreams, Joseph instinctively responded to their problem with this statement, **"Do not interpretations belong to God?"** This is incredibly revealing in regards to Joseph's faith in God.

We need to remind ourselves that it has been at least ten plus years since Joseph had had his two dreams. And by this time many a man would have given up on them but not Joseph. For Joseph, God was real and he had a passion for Him and he wasn't afraid to say so. Think about it, Joseph knew how the Egyptians thought about dreams and in his one little statement he set the record straight as to whom he believed. He had been around the Egyptians long enough to get acquainted with their many gods but he wasn't swayed away from

⁴ Hughes, R. Kent, *Genesis Beginning & Blessing*, Wheaton, Illinois, Crossway Books, 2004, p. 470.

the only True God as many of his ancestors would do in the future. When Joseph said to those two men, “*Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell it to me, please*” (v.8), he was in fact making his request based on his faith that his own two dreams were genuinely from God. His actions also affirm his faith in the omniscience of God, that is to say that he believed that God was the true source of all knowledge. And we should also notice, that Joseph did not say that he could interpret their dreams. He is not claiming to be a professional dream interpreter. There is not indication that Joseph has interpreted anyone’s dreams up to this point, except his own when he was seventeen. **And here is a key point in regards to his leadership training. He only saw himself as a servant of God whom God could use as an instrument of grace. Great leaders never want to take credit for what God is doing. They are more than satisfied to be His servant.**

And along with that we should also note that Joseph is not only willing but eager to be used of God in a lowly place like prison. When many a man would be looking for the big stage to perform their service to God, especially after receiving such dreams as Joseph did, he was faithful in his everyday service to be available for God’s service. And I believed the reason for that was do to the fact that he kept God at the center of his life. In other words everything in his life orbited around God. When a man thinks like this he doesn’t spend his life looking for the great occasions to serve God he sees every occasion as a great opportunity to serve Him. There are no little assignments from God, every assignment is significant and thus they ought to be important to us. A man who thinks in this way has the potential to be a faithful leader of people.

In prison, Joseph demonstrated extraordinary faith in a place where most people have no hope. We have to ask ourselves. How is it, that Joseph could maintain such a high-level of faith in God, in the light of such long and doubtful circumstances. I would submit to you that it was in large part due to his belief in the omniscience of God. It was his understanding of God’s nature that gave him the confidence he needed in the midst of his present circumstances. If you think about it, it really was all he had to personally hang onto. God had spoke to him through two dreams about his future, and what He

was going to do for Joseph. He had the promise in the Abrahamic Covenant and he knew the blessing of God through providence. If that was all you had to personally hang on to how would your faith hold up? When we juxtapose Joseph's life of faith with our own, what does that look like for you? There is no doubt that all of us can learn a lot about faith from a man like Joseph.

c. God responds to Joseph's faith

As we move forward in the story, what we see is how God goes to work for Joseph and gives him the interpretations to both of the dreams. Inverse nine through 11 the cup bear describes his dream to Joseph and in verses 12 through 13 Joseph tells him what his dreams mean *“Then Joseph said to him, “This is the interpretation of it: the three branches are three days; 13 within three more days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your office; and you will put Pharaoh’s cup into his hand according to your former custom when you were his cupbearer.”* What do we want to notice here is that Joseph didn't need to refer to a book of dreams, but he immediately responded to the cup bear with the interpretation. And also take notice that in verse 14 that Joseph showed complete confidence in God's interpretation when he made this request, *“Only keep me in mind when it goes well with you...”* He didn't say “if” it goes well with you, he said *“... When it goes well with you.”* Joseph had complete confidence in what God spoke to him, demonstrating a reliance on God's word as revealed to him.

Joseph was a man of extraordinary faith, but he was also very human as we can see from verses 14 and 15 when he told the cupbearer *“Only keep me in mind when it goes well with you, and please do me a kindness by mentioning me to Pharaoh and get me out of this house. 15 “For I was in fact kidnapped from the land of the Hebrews, and even here I have done nothing that they should have put me into the dungeon.”* Who wouldn't want to get out of prison, who wouldn't want to be freed from such harsh circumstances? One of the things that I find so commendable about Joseph's plea for help is that he doesn't name names. He could have told the cupbearer his whole story and told him about his brothers and Potiphar's wife, but he didn't do that. Joseph protected their identity by giving only the necessary facts to get the point across, but he didn't use it as an opportunity to tear his assailants down. And this demonstrates the

heart of a gracious man to those who had hurt him. And by doing this, Joseph gave room for God to do a work of restoration later on.

Now the Baker also had a dream, but his dream wasn't as favorable as the cupbearer. I am sure that after hearing what Joseph had to say about the cupbearer dream, the Baker thought he was going to hear some good news, but that wasn't the case. Insured, Joseph said he was going to die.

No, when it comes to delivering this kind of news, no one really wants to be the bearer of bad news. But here again, the commendable thing about Joseph is that he doesn't pull any punches. He has got a message from God he has to deliver and he doesn't delay in telling the Baker the truth. This took courage on Joseph's part because if he could have delivered good news to both men, it would have doubled his chances for getting out of prison. And it seems to me that God was testing Joseph to see if he would deliver the whole truth or just the part that benefited him. Every time a preacher steps behind a pulpit, every time a Bible teacher comes to the lecture, every time a child of God witnesses for Christ, he is confronted with the same test; will you tell the whole truth or will you only tell them what tickles their ears for your own benefit. It's easy to get everyone to love you if you only preach the cupbearer sermon, but how many of us are willing to deliver the whole truth by delivering both the cupbearer and the Baker sermon? This kind of balanced preaching and evangelism takes courage and an uncompromising commitment to deliver the whole word of God. I thank God for men and women like Joseph.

To this point in the story, we can see how the providence of God had brought Joseph in contact with two highly influential people. And secondly, the omniscience of God gave him the information that he needed to interpret their dreams. And what we see next is the sovereignty of God at work as He decrees that Joseph should spend two more years in prison.

4. The sovereignty of God was at work preparing Joseph's character for future challenges (vv.20-23).

As we come to the last four verses of chapter 40, we come face to face with the sovereignty of God. When we read the Bible from cover to cover the absolute sovereignty of God is thrown in our faces. This is why the unsaved man rejects the Bible as the Word of God. For if God is sovereign, as the Scriptures declare, than man is obligated to bow to God's **absolute** Lordship over him and the thought of that is most offensive to the natural man as he wants no one to rule over him. Now this is quite understandable in light of the sinfulness of human nature, which started with our first father and mother who sought to be their own gods. And from their fall into sin, the offspring of Adam and Eve have rejected God's sovereignty and sought in a thousand ways to be the lord of their own lives. Within the heart of man, he is ticked off that God would make any decision about his life without first consulting him. Men will ask for God's blessing or help in times of trouble, they will attribute the cosmos to a creator, they will see natural disasters as an act of God, they will spend time in the beauty of the natural world and claim they are in church worshiping God, but as soon as something happens in their life or someone else's life they don't like or don't understand they will immediately call into question why God allowed things to happen the way they did. You see for the natural man God can be God as long as God does what he expects of Him. This is the attitude of every human heart from the moment of conception. In Ps. 51:5, David made this point about his own sin condition, "*Behold, I was brought forth in [a state of] iniquity; my mother was sinful who conceived me [and I too am sinful]. [John 3:6; Rom. 5:12; Eph. 2:3.]*" (*The Amplified Bible* (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1987), Ps 51:5.) And one would naturally ask, what sin could David be referring to in the birth of a new born baby? It is what naturally lays in the heart of the new bore is a built in desire to be their own sovereign and to reject anyone who seeks to dethrone them. **I can easily illustrate that for you. This last week I over heard a father playing with his two sons, four and two. At one point the father was calling for the boys to do something the four year old didn't like. Without hesitation the little boy stood up to his father and yelled him and called him a liar for not letting him do something he wanted to do. Now think about this, just four years earlier that father was holding his new born baby boy with tears of joy running down his face and now this 2ft. 20lb little boy is attacking the sovereignty of his father rule over his life. One has to ask, where did that child get the idea to do such a thing, he can't help it he was born that way.**

Even those of us who have been regenerated by the power of the Spirit of God to be born-again have to do battle with our old nature all the time because it always wants to take God's place in our hearts. And what we have to remind the old man is that he has no authority over me because he was crucified at the cross of Calvary and I am to think of him as being dead and my self alive to Christ who I willfully bow to His absolute sovereign Lordship over my life. This is how strong the temptation is to subvert, avoid or reject the sovereignty of God. And it takes time in the school of faith to learn how to submit to God's sovereignty over one's life. This in part was what Joseph's prison tragedy taught him. Learning to accept and submit to the sovereignty of God is the hardest and longest lesson to learn in the school of faith. Yet, it is a lesson that once learned will bring the greatest joy to a believers heart. Of all the attributes of God, His sovereignty is the one you will most often reach for in the course of life to bring you comfort in the most adverse of circumstances and during the most troubling of times. It is at those times the sovereignty of God will sooth your heart with comfort and give you the ability to rest in the peace that Christ provides us.

Now you may be saying to your self, what exactly is the sovereignty of God? That's a good question, and In the simplest of terms it is speaking to God's ownership of all things and as such He has an absolute right to do whatever He chooses with what He owns. Scripturally the concept is voiced this way:

- Ps. 24:1 *"The earth is the Lord's, and all it contains, The world, and those who dwell in it."*
- Ps. 50:12 *"If I were hungry I would not tell you, For the world is Mine, and all it contains."*
- 1 Chron. 29:11-12, *"Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, indeed everything that is in the heavens and the earth; Yours is the dominion, O Lord, and You exalt Yourself as head over all. 12 "Both riches and honor come from You, and You rule over all, and in Your hand is power and might; and it lies in Your hand to make great and to strengthen everyone."*

- Ps. 103:19 *“The Lord has established His throne in the heavens, And His sovereignty rules over all.”*
- Eph. 1:11 *“also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will,”*

When we think about the concept of God’s sovereignty we should not think of it as a property of His divine nature as we would when we speak of God’s, omniscience, omnipresence, or His omnipotence. His sovereignty is His prerogative by way of Him being the absolute Supreme Being, therefore it is His right to be LORD OF ALL things He has created.

Functionally, God holds the highest position and authority that can exist anywhere and at anytime. Which means that He is above all persons, places and things. Nothing exist that is not under His rule and control. Therefore, His purposes are the most supreme and as such it is the duty of every human being to recognize God’s sovereignty over them and submit to His will.

And along with this, God will sovereignly delegate authority to people to govern human institutions such as civil government, the local church, and the home. When such authority is delegated we are obligated to submit to it as an extension of God’s sovereignty. And here is were all of this intersects with Joseph’s life. If Joseph was going to be fit to serve Pharaoh as the prime minister of Egypt, his character had to be tempered to submit to the sovereignty of God by way of submission to the king of Egypt. And the way God sovereignly chose to do this tempering was to let Joseph sit in prison and learn to submit in his heart to God’s plans for him. Now this is were Joseph finds himself at the end of chapter 40.

If you were with us last week you will remember how the cupbearer and the baker both had dreams. And due to there cultural and religious beliefs they were down hearted because they believed they needed a professional dream interpreter to tell him what their dreams meant. When Joseph discovered what their problem was, he leaned into the omniscience of God to interpret their dreams. Now it is one thing to give an interpretation of a dream and it is quite another thing to have it come to pass. And one of the things that made Joseph’s

interpretation stand out is the amount of details he was able to give. He told them exactly the number of days that were involved, exactly how they were going to be restored to their past positions and for the cupbearer how well things would go for him. On the other hand, the baker was told how he would be lifted up to be hanged and that the birds would eat his flesh. There was actually, a lot of precise details in Joseph's interpretation of the two men's dreams. *Many years ago, there was a man in our church who came to my office and told me that God had given him a dream or a vision about me and wanted to know if I'd like to hear the interpretation. I said sure and this is what he told me, he said I was going to have a tough year. I thought to myself, that's it, that's all you've got. Everybody has tough times in the span of year and how are you to judge something like this. This sort of thing goes on all the time in certain circles and in certain churches, but it is bogus, and is nothing more than a subtle form of superstition and manipulation.*

In our present day, we have been given the sure word of God to direct our lives not dreams and visions, such as Joseph experienced in his day. You will remember from last week that I told you, Joseph and the prophet Daniel are the only people in the Bible, that God use to interpret the dreams of others. And those others were foreign kings, who worshiped false gods. And the interpretation of those dreams was so specific with precise details that even today we look too the prophet Daniels interpretations of king Nebuchadnezzar's dreams to understand God's plans for the end times. It is the specificity and the complete accuracy of fulfillment of the interpretations that confirm it was a work of God. **Only a sovereign God could tell you what a strange dream meant, and then decree that it would come to pass.** This is exactly what we see in the lives of the cupbearer and the Baker. Notice what we read in versus 20 through 22 "*Thus it came about 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 cupbearer and the head of the chief baker among his servants. 21 He restored the chief cupbearer to his office, and he put the cup into Pharaoh's hand; 22 but he hanged the chief baker, just as Joseph had interpreted to them.*" The interpretation was exact, it was precise and it was fulfill just as God had said it would.

Another fulfillment of Joseph's interpretation was significant for him in a couple of ways.

- First, it confirmed that God was still actively at work in his own life. This had to have been an encouraging experience for Joseph. With all the trouble that had come upon him to bring him to live in a prison and to not personally hear from God for many years but now to have God use him in more of a personal way had to give him a renewed sense of hope that God was still working out His plans in Joseph's life.
- Secondly, this experience would have been confirming in regards to Joseph's own dreams. Remember that Joseph was only 17 when he had his dreams and it is quite likely that there were times when he might have asked himself if those dreams were actually from God. This experience would have confirmed the authenticity of his dreams. If we just reverse the situation, it highlights the point. Imagine if those two men had never been released from prison, or what if the cup was hanged, and the baker had lived, or what if both men had been hanged, that sort of thing would have created doubt in Joseph's mind about his own dreams and rightly so. But the fulfillment of his interpretation was exactly as he had said, and this would've given him confidence the interpretation of his own dreams that had not been fulfilled yet.

But there was a down side to all of this, due to the fact that the cupbearer forgot about Joseph, which meant, Joseph had to spend two more years in prison, as we can see from chapter 41, verse one. Can you just picture the anticipation of Joseph, when in three days the men were released as he had said, and then, when the word went through the prison that the royal Baker had been hung, Joseph must've thought that his prison door would be soon opened, and he would be released what is the days turned into weeks and weeks into months and months turned into years he became painfully aware that the cupbearer had not remembered him at all. **This was another test of Joseph's character. The temptation to become embittered and indifferent towards God would have been very real for Joseph.** When it comes to temptations the mechanics are always the same in the sense that they seek to dethrone God in one way or another. But the form they take can be fitted to whatever place in life we find ourselves. When Mrs. Potiphar's temptation was a sexual temptation for Joseph when he was in the prime of his life. Now he sits in prison falsely accused and just had an opportunity snatched away from him to get out of the place. He could have easily allowed himself to hate the world and become embittered and hardhearted toward God but there is no indication that he fell into this sin.

The Bible does not tell us what the next two years was like for Joseph, but it is very likely that those years in many ways were very ordinary and mundane for him. And I would suggest to you that they were some of the most important years for him in the school of faith. It would have been during those years that he came to understand that he could not put his trust in men to set him free. And in the quietness of waiting for God, the foundation of his character was being deepened to support the weight of the great call that would soon come upon his life. Two years of waiting was the steel that God used to put a razor's edge of spiritual maturity upon Joseph's life, and that put him in good company.

- Noah had to wait for a year for the water to recede.
- Abraham had to wait 25 years for the son that God had promised him.
- Jacob had to wait seven years and then work another seven to marry Rachel.
- Moses had to wait 80 years before he was ready to leave the Hebrews out of Egypt.
- David was anointed as king of Israel when he was a boy but had to wait many years before he actually sat on the throne.
- Jesus had to wait 30 years to start his earthly ministry that would take Him to the cross of Calvary.

One of the great advantages that comes from waiting upon God is that it teaches us that He is sovereign and we are not. And we learn to accept this. It gives us great peace in our lives to know experientially that God is in complete control of all the events of my life and that He has a purpose for what He allows me to go through.

Conclusion

Now, as we draw this chapter to a close what we see is that, even though Joseph was in prison, God was doing a great and gracious work in his life of molding him for the challenges of the future. The trials and temptations that he had faced up to this point in his life would be nothing compared to what he would find as the second in command of the most powerful nation on earth. Listen how **Kent Hughes** describe what lay ahead for Joseph. "In two years, Joseph would be catapulted to life at the top, and it would be no picnic. Every morning of his existence,

he would rise to the pagan wake-up hymns to the Egyptians idols. Life would be lived amidst a swirl of sensuality. Mrs. Pipers were everywhere. Open cookie jars adorned every mansion of the Nile. The chief baker's intrigues were a mere sampling of the deadly ambitions of the court. Lying and backbiting filled the air of Joseph's aristocratic existence. And he was the one righteous man in Egypt—and a Hebrew at that! Such righteousness was sure to offend the wicked, especially those who coveted his position.”⁵ In the future, life was not going to be easy for Joseph to maintain a righteous character. I am sure that in Joseph's old age h had looked back on his days in prison as some of the most profound days of his life. **Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn** was a Russian writer who spent eight years in the infamous Soviet Gulag camp system. After his stay in the gulag he wrote this of the prison that held him captive, “...In the intoxication of youthful success, I had felt myself to be infallible, and I was therefore cruel. In the surfeit of power, I was a murderer, and an oppressor. In my most evil moments, I was convinced that I was doing good, and I was well supplied with systematic arguments. And it was only when I lay there on rotting prison straw, that I sensed within myself the first stirrings of good. gradually, it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, not between classes, nor between political parties, either—but right through every human heart—and through all human hearts... so bless you, prison, for having been in my life.”⁶

In retrospect, Joseph would come to see that his stay in prison was the work of his God, who was providentially, omniscient, and sovereignly working to develop character qualities in his life. That would prove that the wheel of God is good and acceptable. He confessed this to be true later in life, he told his brothers,” what you meant for evil god meant for good.” somehow it seems that Joseph got better with every trial. His faith grew, his sensitivity to people increase, his discreetness about those who hurt him is unbelievable, and his ability to quietly way upon God are all qualities about him that we should admire and try to make part of our lives. But having said all of that, we cannot allow those things to shade the raw truth that those kinds of characteristics were forged under the heat of real physical and emotional experiences that hurt him. The truth of the matter is that God is willing to hurt us to make us better. This was

⁵ Hughes, R. Kent, *Genesis Beginning & Blessing*, Wheaton, Illinois, Crossway Books, 2004, p.473.

⁶ Taken from Charles Swindoll book, *Joseph a Man of Integrity and Forgiveness*, Nashville, Tennessee, W. Publishing Group a division of Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1998, p.41.

crystallized for me in a poem I came across. The poet use the idea of a blacksmith as a metaphor, for God molding a Christians character.

“Pain’s furnace heat within me quivers.
God’s breath upon the flame doth blow,
And all my heart in anguish shivers
And trembles at the fiery glow,
and yet I whisper, ‘As God will!’
And in His hottest fire hold still.

He comes and lays my heart, all heated,
On the hard anvil, minded so
Into His own fair shape to beat it
With his great hammer, blow on blow!
And yet I whisper, ‘As God will!’
And at His heaviest blows hold still.

He takes my softened heart, and beats it:
The sparks fly off at every blow.
He turns it o’er and o’er and heats it,
and lets it cool, and makes it glow.
And yet I whisper, ‘As God will!’
And in His mighty hand hold still.

Why should I murmur? for the sorrow
Thus only long-lived would be;
Its end may come, and will, tomorrow,
When God has done His work in me.
So I say, trusting, ‘As God will!’
An, trusting to the end, hold still.

He kindles for my profit purely
Affliction’s fiery, glowing brand:

And all His heaviest blows are surely
Inflicted by a Masters-hand
So I say, praying, 'As God will!'
And hope in Him, and suffer still."

We are not able to see our lives retrospectively until we have gone through the tragedies of life but God through the Scriptures has given us these incredible people of faith, like Joseph, to give us hope, in the midst of trials, and to remind us:

- That He is working **providentially** which gives us **confidence** that every event in our lives has purpose.
- **Omnisciently**, which gives us **hope** in our future knowing that God knows where we are going and what He wants to do with us.
- **Sovereignly**, which gives us **peace of mind** knowing that everything's that takes place in our lives must be first filter through the loving hands our God and Father.