LESSON 3

God's Wisdom in Prison

Don't interpretations belong to God?

— Genesis 40:8

Genesis 40 gives Joseph everything he needs to get out of prison, and leaves him in it for two more years.

Introduction

IN GENESIS 40, NOTHING CHANGES FOR JOSEPH. Read through the chapter and pay attention to what happens. Two men are brought into custody, and both of them dream on the same night. Joseph interprets both dreams, and three days later both interpretations come true. One man goes back to work with Pharaoh's cup in his hand, and the other is hanged. The only person in the chapter who does anything right ends it exactly where he started. He is still waiting on prisoners, with no charge filed against him, no hearing scheduled, and no reason to believe tomorrow will be any different.

In twenty-three verses, everyone's circumstances change except Joseph's.

Joseph is twenty-eight years old now. Eleven years have passed since his brothers watched him walk across the field at Dothan. The robe he wore that day is gone. So is the second garment, the one Potiphar's wife was holding when she started shouting. He has been a favored son, a slave, a trusted steward, and a man accused of assaulting his master's wife. Every one of those changes took him further down.

In our last lesson, we saw that Genesis says four times that the Lord was with Joseph. Genesis 40 shows us what that looked like in prison. God gives Joseph something in this chapter, but it isn't his freedom. He gives Joseph the ability to tell two frightened men exactly what is about to happen to them. That gift does a great deal of good for others, and it does nothing for Joseph.

Stephen said God gave Joseph *favor and wisdom* (Acts 7:10). This chapter is about the wisdom. It came long before the rescue did, and Joseph had to decide what to do with a gift that helped everyone except himself.

The Bottom of the Bottom (40:1–4)

Two of Pharaoh's officials offended the king of Egypt. We aren't told what they did. The word "*offended*" sounds mild, but the Hebrew reads "*offended against*," and verse 1 lets us know Pharaoh's anger in verse 2 had real grounds.[35]

These were not ordinary servants. The chief cupbearer stood closer to the throne than almost anyone. He opened the king's wine and tasted it before Pharaoh drank. Egyptian records sometimes describe him as *pure of hands*. The title of the chief baker can be translated *royal table scribe*, which made him responsible for everything that went on Pharaoh's plate. Both men were charged with keeping the king alive, and both ended up in custody at the same time. It is likely Pharaoh became sick after a meal and didn't know which of them to blame.[36]

Note where these men were sent. They weren't thrown in with common thieves. Verse 3 says they were held in the house of the captain of the guards, in the same prison where Joseph was confined. It was the place where disgraced officials of the court were kept. Then verse 4 says, *The captain of the guards assigned Joseph to them as their personal attendant.*[37]

Follow the direction Joseph's life is moving. He had managed Potiphar's entire estate. Then he managed the prison for a warden who stopped checking his work. Now he was assigned to wait on two inmates. Kidner notes what this cost him. Just when he had gained a little higher ground, Joseph found himself at the bottom again as *a servant of prisoners*.[38] The warden's trust gave Joseph a position. It was waiting on two disgraced officials, though, that eventually brought him to Pharaoh. The last part of verse 4 says *they were in custody for some time.* The Hebrew is even less specific and simply says *days.*[39]

Two Faces in the Morning (40:5–8)

Both men dreamed on the same night, *and Genesis says each dream had its own meaning.* This is the second pair of dreams in Joseph's story. Joseph had two dreams. These two men each had one on the same night. Pharaoh will have two more. When God says something twice in this story, the matter is settled.[40]

Verse 6 is easy to read past. *When Joseph came to them in the morning, he saw that they looked distraught.* Joseph noticed. Then in verse 7 he asked, *Why do you look so sad today?* Compare that with chapter 37. There, Joseph stood among brothers who couldn't speak a kind word to him and told them, twice, about dreams in which they bowed to him. He had no idea how they were taking it. Eleven years later, he walks into a room and reads the faces of two men before either of them says a word.[41]

The seventeen-year-old Joseph would never have thought to ask that question. The two men told him what was troubling them: *We had dreams, but there is no one to interpret them.* Egypt had an entire class of professionals who interpreted dreams, complete with manuals to consult. In prison, these men couldn't get to any of them.

Joseph's answer comes in verse 8: *Don't interpretations belong to God? Tell me your dreams.*

How many times does Joseph give God the credit in this chapter? Only once, and it comes here in verse 8, before he has interpreted anything. He said it to two Egyptians who had no reason to care which god received the credit. Then he asked them to tell him their dreams. Joseph was willing to help, and he wanted them to know who would be doing the work. This was already the way Joseph thought, and he would say the same thing to Pharaoh (41:16) and, years later, to his brothers (45:8).

It cost Joseph something to say this. He was still carrying two dreams of his own that no one had ever interpreted and that hadn't come true. Yet he told these two men that interpretations belong to God, even though God had said nothing more to him about his own dreams.

The Vine and the Cup (40:9–15)

The cupbearer went first. In his dream he saw a vine with three branches. It budded, blossomed, and ripened all at once, faster than any real vine could grow. Pharaoh's cup was in his hand. He squeezed the

CHART 1

Two Dreams, Three Days

	The chief cupbearer	The chief baker
What he sees	A vine, three branches, ripe grapes (40:9–11)	Three baskets of white bread on his head (40:16–17)
Where it ends	Pharaoh's cup back in Pharaoh's hand	Birds eating out of the top basket
Who speaks first	Volunteers his dream (40:9)	Waits until the first reading is good (40:16)
Joseph's opening	"The three branches are three days" (40:12)	"The three baskets are three days" (40:18)
The same phrase	"Pharaoh will lift up your head" (40:13)	"…lift up your head—from off you" (40:19)
On the third day	Restored; the cup in his hand (40:21)	Hanged on a tree (40:22)
Afterward	He forgets Joseph (40:23)	—

Same night, same number, same phrase. One of them goes back to work.

grapes into the cup and placed it in Pharaoh's hand. The cupbearer dreamed he was back at work. The details may be symbolic, but they fit his office exactly, since a cupbearer was responsible for whatever he handed the king.[42]

Joseph gave him a direct answer. *The three branches are three days. In just three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your position.* To "lift up the head" was a common Hebrew way of saying that a man who had been brought low was restored (cf. 2 Kings 25:27; Psalm 3:3; 27:6). Keep that phrase in mind, because we will see it again.[43]

Then we come to verses 14 and 15. In all fourteen chapters of Joseph's story, this is the only time he says out loud how any of it has affected him.

But when all goes well for you, remember that I was with you. Please show kindness to me by mentioning me to Pharaoh, and get me out of this prison. For I was kidnapped from the land of the Hebrews, and even here I have done nothing that they should put me in the dungeon.

Joseph said he was kidnapped and that he had done nothing wrong. Both statements were true, and he didn't attach any self-pity to either one. He didn't name his brothers, and he didn't name Potiphar's wife. He stated the facts and asked for a favor.[44]

Two Hebrew words are important here. The first is *ḥesed*, which describes a loyal kindness that keeps faith with another person. Joseph uses that word when he asks the cupbearer to *please show kindness to me*. Genesis used the same word just three verses before this chapter began: *the Lord was with Joseph and extended kindness to him* (39:21). God's *ḥesed* had put a slave in charge of a prison. Joseph asked a man for that same kindness and heard nothing back.

The second word is *bôr*. The CSB translates it *dungeon* in verse 15, but back in 37:24 it translates the same word as *pit*: *they took him and threw him into the pit. The pit was empty, without water.* Because the English uses two different words, the connection is lost in translation. Joseph was telling this Egyptian that he was in the pit again.

CHART 2

One Phrase, Two Endings

40:13	**To the cupbearer** Restored	"Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your position."
40:19	**To the baker** Executed	"Pharaoh will lift up your head—from off you—and hang you on a tree."
40:20	**At the birthday feast** Both, at one table	"He elevated the chief cupbearer and the chief baker among his servants."

One Hebrew idiom, three times in seven verses. At verse 20 the CSB renders it "elevated," so the third use disappears in English.

The Baskets and the Birds (40:16–19)

Verse 16 tells us something about the baker. *When the chief baker saw that the interpretation was positive, he said to Joseph, "I also had a dream."* He had been holding his dream back. It was only after he heard the cupbearer's good news that he was willing to share it.

The baker dreamed he had three baskets of white bread on his head. In the top basket were *all sorts of baked goods for Pharaoh.* That detail is there for a reason. The Egyptian dictionary lists thirty-eight kinds of cake and fifty-seven kinds of bread, which tells us something about the department this man oversaw.[45] In his dream, birds were eating from the top basket while it sat on his head. He couldn't get the food to the king, and he couldn't stop the birds from taking it.

Joseph began his answer the same way he had before. *The three baskets are three days.* Then he used the same verb he had used with the cupbearer, but this time it carried a terrible meaning. *In just three days Pharaoh will lift up your head—from off you—and hang you on a tree. Then the birds will eat the flesh from your body.*[46]

Joseph used the same phrase for both men. One would be lifted up to his old position, and the other would be lifted up on a pole.

It would have been easy for Joseph to soften his answer. He was a slave with no standing, speaking to a court official who might still be useful to him for three more days. He had already asked one of these men for a favor. Telling the other one what the third day would bring was not the way to win friends. Joseph told him anyway, because that is what God had given him to say.

Genesis doesn't record the baker's response.

The Birthday and the Blank (40:20–23)

Three days later it was Pharaoh's birthday, and he held a feast for all his servants. Verse 20 says he *elevated the chief cupbearer and the chief baker among his servants*, and the Hebrew uses that same expression about lifting the head one more time. The same phrase applied to both men, and it meant opposite things for each of them at the same feast.[47]

The cupbearer was restored, and *he placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand*, exactly as he had seen in his dream. The baker was hanged. The writer repeats the wording of verses 13 and 19 on purpose, so we can see how precisely Joseph's words came true.[48]

For eleven years Joseph had carried two dreams of his own with nothing to show for them. Now he had evidence. God had spoken through him, accurately, down to the very day. And the cupbearer walked out of that prison owing Joseph a favor and standing closer to Pharaoh than anyone else in Egypt.

Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph; he forgot him.[49]

Genesis says it twice in the same sentence. Hebrew repeats a thought when it wants us to feel its weight, the same way Pharaoh's two dreams will show that the matter has been settled (41:32). This is the only doubling in the chapter, and Moses uses it to describe a man forgetting someone.[50]

Look closely at verse 23. The subject of the sentence is the cupbearer, and he isn't a villain. He got his job back, walked out into the daylight, and had a great deal on his mind. He never decided to leave Joseph in prison. He simply stopped thinking about him. Most people who are forgotten aren't forgotten on purpose.

Genesis tells us nothing about the next two years. We don't know whether Joseph prayed, or whether he watched the door every morning for a few weeks before he gave up. We don't know whether the interpretations he had gotten so exactly right began to feel, after many months, like a cruel joke. God's wisdom worked perfectly through a prisoner for twenty-three verses, and the chapter ends with a man no one remembered.

Genesis stops there, and so will we.

Looking to Christ

No New Testament writer connects Genesis 40 directly to the cross, so we should hold this loosely. Still, the scene has a recognizable pattern, and Scripture uses that pattern again.

Consider the arrangement. An innocent man is in custody for something he didn't do. Two guilty men are placed with him. Both have been condemned, both hear a word from him, and that word tells which of them will be lifted up to life and which will be hanged. One of them asks to be remembered.

Now turn to Luke 23. Three men are being crucified, and the innocent one is in the middle. One criminal mocks Jesus. The other rebukes him: *We are punished justly, because we're getting back what we deserve for the things we did, but this man has done nothing wrong.* That is very close to what Joseph said about himself in prison. Then the man asks, *Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.*

The CSB translates Joseph's request in 40:14 as *remember that I was with you*, but the Hebrew verb is *zākar*, the same verb Moses uses nine verses later when he says the cupbearer did *not* remember. Joseph asked a man to remember him and waited two years with no answer. The dying thief asked Jesus to remember him and received his answer before the sun went down: *Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.*

There is a second connection in this chapter, and it comes from one phrase in verse 19: *hang you on a tree.* The man who was hanged in Genesis 40 was guilty, and everyone at Pharaoh's feast knew it. Paul uses that same language to describe the one man who was completely innocent: *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, because it is written, Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree* (Galatians 3:13).

We shouldn't press either picture further than it will go. In this chapter Joseph is simply a prisoner asking a favor from a man who forgot him. But the pattern keeps showing up in Scripture, and when it appears at the cross, the innocent man in the middle answers the request himself.

Applying the Text

God's road to the throne room ran through a demotion. Joseph managed an estate, then managed a prison, and then was assigned to carry meals to two inmates. That last assignment was the smallest and most humiliating of the three, and it was the only one that put him in a room with a man who would one day stand beside Pharaoh. Neither of his promotions did that. None of us is told such things in advance. You can't see it from inside the demotion.

Learn to notice when someone is hurting. Joseph asked, *Why do you look so sad today?* That question came from a man with far more reason to be miserable than either of the men he was serving. Joseph could easily have walked in, done his job, and noticed nothing. Look around at the people you see every week. Someone's face may have changed a few Sundays ago, and no one has said a word to them about it.

Asking for help is not a failure of faith. Joseph said that interpretations belong to God, and six verses later he asked a man to speak to Pharaoh on his behalf. Genesis puts Joseph's trust in God and his request for help in the same passage and sees no conflict between them. Praying about a problem doesn't excuse us from doing what we can about it.

Someone has to be willing to tell the hard truth. The baker asked, and Joseph told him what was coming. He gained nothing by it and risked what little he had. Many of us know someone who hears only the comfortable part of what they need to hear. Everyone who loves them has quietly decided that kindness means saying nothing. We make that decision for them, and we never tell them we made it.

Don't build your hope on someone else's memory. The cupbearer wasn't cruel. He was busy and grateful, and then he was gone. If you are waiting for someone to come through for you the way you would come through for them, you may wait a long time, and their forgetting may not even be a sin. God has not forgotten you. That is not the same as saying God will fix everything by Tuesday, and Joseph had to live with that difference for two more years.

For Discussion

1. The only place in Joseph's story where he says how he feels about his situation is 40:14–15. What exactly does he say there, and whom does he never blame?

2. Joseph told two Egyptians that interpretations belong to God before he interpreted anything (40:8). Why do you think he said that out loud to men who didn't know his God?

3. The cupbearer forgot Joseph. Was that a sin, or was he simply an ordinary man with a lot on his mind? Does your answer change the way you read verse 23?

4. Joseph asked for kindness and received two years of silence. When have you asked someone for help you had every right to expect and never heard back? How did that affect your prayers?

5. Is someone waiting on you right now for something you promised to do and then forgot about?

6. Moses says nothing about the two years after verse 23. Why do you think he left them blank? What would be lost if he had filled them in?

Looking Ahead

Lesson 4: Raised Up by God (Genesis 41)

Two more years pass between chapter 40 and chapter 41, and then Pharaoh has a troubling night. In one morning, Joseph goes from the dungeon to a shave, a change of clothes, and the second-highest office in Egypt. The man who finally mentions his name is the one who forgot it. Watch the garments again, and watch for the third pair of dreams. And notice what that one morning does to a man who has waited thirteen years for it.

Before you come, read Genesis 41 all the way through. Count how many times Joseph speaks of God in front of a king who believed he was a god.

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[35] Kidner, *Genesis*. On 40:1 he notes that "offended" is misleading, since the Hebrew reads "offended against"; the verse establishes that there were real grounds for Pharaoh's displeasure in verse 2. He adds that the chief cupbearer and baker were valued officials, comparing Nehemiah, whose office as cupbearer to Artaxerxes made him a man of influence and ability (cf. Nehemiah 1:11; 2:1–8)

[36] Hughes, *Genesis*. On 40:1–4 he explains that Egyptian cupbearers were sometimes called "pure of hands," since the cupbearer tasted the wine before it reached the king and had to be a man of integrity, and that the baker's office can be rendered "royal table scribe." Grigoni et al., *Joseph*. On 40:1–4 they suggest, as Hughes does, that Pharaoh may have fallen ill after a meal and suspected one or both men, and add that royal servants who displeased the king were held in the custody of the captain of the guard awaiting a decision rather than thrown into a common dungeon.

[37] Grigoni et al., *Joseph*. On 40:3 they note that the Hebrew phrase usually rendered "prison" means "house of confinement," and that Joseph was held among political prisoners, disgraced servants of the royal court, rather than among thieves and murderers. Kidner, *Genesis*. On 40:3 he insists, against those who read the chapter as portraying a Joseph who was not himself a prisoner, that verses 3 and 15 settle the matter.

[38] Kidner, *Genesis*. On 40:4 he observes that arrangements for prisoners this notable were made by the captain of the guard himself, presumably still Potiphar, who would have remembered Joseph's reliability. Joseph, having at last gained higher ground, was at the bottom again, a servant of prisoners; and this, rather than his former promotion, proved to be the way forward. Hughes, *Genesis*. On 40:1–4 he puts it more bluntly: Joseph became the servant of men accused of treason and attempted regicide, at the bottom of the bottom.

[39] Grigoni et al., *Joseph*. On 40:4 they note that the text says literally that the two officials were in custody for "days."

[40] Kidner, *Genesis*. On 40:6–8 he observes that the conviction that dreams carried meaning was thoroughly in character for Egyptians, who commonly held them to be predictive and developed a body of writing on their interpretation. Hughes, *Genesis*. On 40:5–8 he lists three reasons the dreams alarmed these men: the Egyptian belief that sleep put a person in contact with another world, the conviction that a pair of dreams indicated certainty of fulfillment, and the absence in prison of the professional interpreters and dream books thought necessary to unlock them. Grigoni et al., *Joseph*. On 40:5–8 they add that Egyptians and Mesopotamians kept written records of dreams and their interpretations for professional consultation.

[41] Hughes, *Genesis*. On 40:5–8 he contrasts Joseph's compassionate question with the self-centered insensitivity he had shown his brothers as a seventeen-year-old, and credits the change to what his own suffering had made of him.

[42] Kidner, *Genesis*. On 40:11 he cites Jozef Vergote, *Joseph en Égypte: Genèse chap. 37–50 à la lumière des études égyptologiques récentes*, Orientalia et Biblica Lovaniensia 3 (Louvain: Publications Universitaires, 1959). Vergote allows that the dream-

actions may symbolize the cupbearer's duties rather than describe them, and notes that they throw light on the epithet "clean of hands" attached to the office: he was responsible for opening and tasting the wine, and so for the quality of what he presented.

[43] Kidner, *Genesis*. On 40:13 he calls "lifting the head" of one who is down an expressive metaphor, comparing 2 Kings 25:27 and, with a different Hebrew verb, Psalms 3:3 and 27:6.

[44] Grigoni et al., *Joseph*. On 40:14–15 they observe that this is the only dialogue in which Joseph reflects openly about his own circumstances. Borthwick, *Life of Joseph*. On 40:14 he reads the wording as an urgent plea and notes that no one in Egypt stood closer to Pharaoh than the chief cupbearer, so Joseph knew a favorable word from him would change everything. Hughes, *Genesis*. He quotes Brueggemann, *Genesis*, for the line that the powerful man born to rule is also a needful one.

[45] Kidner, *Genesis*. On 40:16 he notes that the Hebrew word *ḥōrî* occurs only here, which accounts for the variant renderings: one Arabic root suggests whiteness, another wickerwork. On 40:17 he cites Vergote, *Joseph en Égypte*, for the thirty-eight varieties of cake and fifty-seven of bread listed in Adolf Erman and Hermann Grapow, eds., *Wörterbuch der ägyptischen Sprache*, 5 vols. (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1926–1931), which give some idea of the professional standards of the baker's department. Hughes, *Genesis*. He cites the same figures.

[46] Kidner, *Genesis*. On 40:19 he notes the cryptic and deliberately ambiguous opening of this oracle of destiny (cf. 27:39–40), and cautions that the apparent cruelty of raising the man's hopes only to dash them may be an artifact of cold print, since the speaker's manner and tone would have made the news plain at once.

[47] Hughes, *Genesis*. On 40:20–23 he notes that Egyptian literature records amnesties granted on Pharaoh's birthday in later periods, though it was more common to grant them on the anniversary of his accession, itself described as the birth of a god.

[48] Hughes, *Genesis*. On 40:20–23 he observes that the specific words and phrases spoken to the cupbearer in verse 13 and to the baker in verse 19 are echoed in the report of their fulfillment, underlining the precision with which Joseph's interpretations came true.

[49] Smith, *Pentateuch*. On 39:21–40:23 he sums up the outcome: despite the obvious implications of Joseph's ability to interpret dreams, the cupbearer did not remember him, and two years elapsed before he did.

[50] Borthwick, *Life of Joseph*. On 40:23 he explains that repeating a phrase was a Hebrew way of intensifying it, and that the doubling here — he did not remember him, he forgot him — presses the disappointment Joseph must have felt as the days after the cupbearer's release lengthened. He notes that the wait is underscored again at 41:1, where the Hebrew adds *yāmîm*, "years of days," which older versions render "two full years" and the CSB smooths away.