

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

GENESIS 40 IS THE CHAPTER WHERE NOTHING HAPPENS TO JOSEPH. Read it again and count. Two men arrive in custody. Two men dream on the same night. Joseph interprets both dreams, and three days later both interpretations come true. One man goes back to work with a cup in his hand. One man is hanged. And the only person in the chapter who does anything right ends it exactly where he began, attending prisoners, with no charge filed, no hearing scheduled, and no reason to think tomorrow will look different.

Twenty-three verses, and everybody's circumstances change but his.

He's twenty-eight years old now. Eleven years have gone by since his brothers watched him come across a field at Dothan. The coat he wore that day is gone. So is the second garment, the one Potiphar's wife was still holding when she started shouting. He has been a favored son, a slave, a trusted household steward, and a man accused of assaulting his master's wife, and the only direction any of it has moved him is down.

The last lesson pointed out that Genesis says four times that the Lord was with him. Now, Genesis 40 shows us what that looked like. God hands Joseph something here, and it isn't freedom. It's the ability to tell two frightened men exactly what is about to happen to them, which does a great deal of good and does Joseph none.

Stephen said God gave him *favor and wisdom* (Acts 7:10). This is the wisdom. It arrives long before the rescue does, and Joseph must decide what to do with a gift that helps everybody but him.

The Bottom of the Bottom (40:1–4)

Two officials offend the king of Egypt. How, we aren't told. "*Offended*" is soft. The Hebrew reads "*offended against*," and verse 1 tells us there were real grounds for the anger in verse 2.³⁵

These aren't kitchen help. The chief cupbearer is the man who stands nearest the throne, who opens and tastes the wine before the king drinks it. Egyptian records sometimes call him *pure of hands*. The chief

baker's office can be rendered *royal table scribe*, which made him answerable for whatever went onto Pharaoh's plate. Two men charged with keeping the king alive, both in custody the same week. Pharaoh probably got sick after a meal and didn't know which of them to blame.³⁶

Where they're sent needs to be seen. They're not thrown in with thieves. Verse 3 says they were in the house of the captain of the guards, in the prison where Joseph is confined, which was the holding place for disgraced men of the court. Then verse 4: *The captain of the guards assigned Joseph to them as their personal attendant.*³⁷

Follow the direction. Joseph had run Potiphar's entire estate. Then he ran the prison for a warden who stopped checking his work. Now he's been handed back down to be a valet for two inmates. Kidner catches what that costs him. Having at last gained a little higher ground, Joseph is at the bottom again, *a servant of prisoners*.³⁸ The warden's trust got Joseph a title. Waiting on two disgraced officials got him to Pharaoh. Then the last clause of verse 4: *they were in custody for some time*. The Hebrew is vaguer still. It says *days*.³⁹

Two Faces in the Morning (40:5–8)

Both men dream on the same night, *and Genesis says each dream had its own meaning*. This is the second pair of dreams in the story. Joseph had two. These two have one apiece on one night. Pharaoh will have two. Doubled means settled.⁴⁰

Then verse 6, which is easy to read past. *When Joseph came to them in the morning, he saw that they looked distraught*. He notices. And in verse 7 he asks: *Why do you look so sad today?* Set that beside chapter 37. There, a boy stands in a circle of grown men who can't say a peaceful word to him and tells them, twice,

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.

about a dream in which they bow to him. He has no idea what he's looking at. Eleven years later, he walks into a room and reads two faces before either man opens his mouth.⁴¹

He's asking a question the seventeen-year-old couldn't have thought to ask. They tell him the trouble. *We had dreams, but there is no one to interpret them.* Egypt kept a whole professional class for this, with dream manuals to consult. In prison you can't reach any of them.

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

How many times does Joseph hand God the credit in this chapter? Once. It comes here, in verse 8, before he has interpreted anything, in front of two Egyptians with no reason to care whose God gets credit for what. Then he asks for the dreams anyway. He isn't refusing the work; he's naming who does it. That was already the habit of his mind, and he'll say the same thing to Pharaoh (41:16) and years later to his brothers (45:8).

It costs him something to say that here. Joseph is holding two dreams of his own that nobody ever interpreted and that nothing has come of yet. He tells two Egyptians that interpretations belong to God while God hasn't said anything further to him about his own.

The Vine and the Cup (40:9–15)

The cupbearer goes first. A vine, three branches, budding and blossoming and ripening in one motion, faster than any vine grows. Pharaoh's cup is in his hand. He squeezes the grapes into it and puts the cup in Pharaoh's hand. The man dreams himself back at work. The actions may be symbolic rather than literal, but they're an exact fit for his office. A cupbearer answered for the quality of whatever he handed the king.⁴²

Joseph gives it to him straight. *The three branches are three days. In just three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your position.* Lifting the head is the ordinary Hebrew way of saying that a man who was down has been brought up again (cf. 2 Kings 25:27; Psalm 3:3; 27:6). Hold onto that phrase. It comes back.⁴³

Then verses 14 and 15. In fourteen chapters, this is the only time Joseph says out loud how any of it feels.

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.

Kidnapped. Done nothing. Two flat claims, both true, and no self-pity attached to either. He doesn't name his brothers. He doesn't name Potiphar's wife. He states the facts and asks a favor.⁴⁴

Two Hebrew words carry the weight here. The first is *hesed*, the loyal kindness that keeps faith with somebody. Joseph uses it in his request: please show kindness to me. Genesis used it three verses before this chapter opened: the Lord was with Joseph and extended kindness to him (39:21). God's *hesed* had put a slave in charge of a prison. Joseph asks a man for the same thing and gets silence.

The second is *bôr*. The CSB gives us *dungeon* in verse 15, and back in 37:24 it gives us *pit*: *they took him and threw him into the pit. The pit was empty, without water.* One Hebrew word, two English ones, and the link between the two disappears in translation. Joseph is telling this Egyptian that he's 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 gives the baker away. *When the chief baker saw that the interpretation was positive, he said to Joseph, "I also had a dream."* He'd been holding it back. The other man's good news loosened his tongue.

Three baskets of white bread on his head. In the top one, *all sorts of baked goods for Pharaoh.* That phrase is not filler. The Egyptian dictionary lists thirty-eight kinds of cake and fifty-seven kinds of bread, which tells you something about the department he'd been running.⁴⁵ And birds are eating out of the top basket while it sits on his head. He can't get the food to the king, and he can't stop what is taking it.

Joseph opens the same way. *The three baskets are three days.* Then the same verb as before, with the floor taken out from under it. *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

Same phrase. Two men. One of them is going up, and one of them is going up on a pole.

The easiest thing in the world would have been to soften that. Joseph is a slave with no standing, talking to a court official who might still, for three more days, be worth something to him. He had already asked one of these men for a favor. Telling the second one what the third day holds for him is not how a man positions himself. He says it anyway, because it's what God gave him to say.

Nobody wrote down what the baker said.

The Birthday and the Blank (40:20–23)

Three days later, Pharaoh's birthday. A feast for the whole household. And verse 20 says he *elevated the chief cupbearer and the chief baker among his servants*, which is that same lifting of the head one more time. The same phrase covers both men, and it means opposite things to each of them at the same table.⁴⁷

The cupbearer is restored, and *he placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand*, which is the exact picture from the dream. The baker is hanged. The narrator echoes the wording of verse 13 and verse 19 on purpose, so you can't miss how precisely it landed.⁴⁸

Joseph had carried two dreams of his own that long with nothing to show for them. Now he has evidence. God speaks through him, accurately, down to the day. And the cupbearer walks out of that prison owing him 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 one breath. Hebrew doubles a phrase when it wants you to feel the weight of it, the same convention that will make Pharaoh's two dreams mean the matter is settled (41:32). It's the only doubling in the chapter, and Moses spends it on a man's failure to think of somebody⁵⁰

Look at who verse 23 is about. The subject of that sentence is the cupbearer, and the cupbearer is not a villain. He is a man who got his job back, walked out into the daylight, and had a great deal on his mind. He didn't decide to leave Joseph in prison. He simply stopped thinking about him. Almost nobody is forgotten on purpose.

Genesis tells us nothing about the two years that follow. Whether Joseph prayed. Whether he stood at the door every morning for a few weeks and then quit standing there. Whether the interpretations he'd gotten so exactly right began to look, by the twentieth month, like a cruel joke. God's wisdom worked perfectly through a prisoner for twenty-three verses, and the chapter closes on a man nobody mentioned.

That's where Genesis stops. We'll stop there too.

Looking to Christ

No New Testament writer runs a line from Genesis 40 to the cross, so hold this loosely. But the scene has a shape, and Scripture uses that shape again.

Start with the arrangement. An innocent man is in custody he did nothing to earn. Two guilty men are set on either side of him. Both are condemned, both hear a word from him, and that word decides which one is lifted to life and which one is hanged. One of them asks to be remembered.

Now Luke 23. Three men are being executed, and the innocent one is in the middle. One criminal jeers. The other answers 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's close to what Joseph said about himself in the dungeon. And then the request: *Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.*

The CSB smooths Joseph's version at 40:14 into *remember that I was with you*, but the Hebrew verb is *zākar*, and it's the same verb Moses negates nine verses later. Joseph asked a man to remember him and

waited two years for nothing. The dying thief asked God to remember him and had his answer before the sun went down: *Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.*

There's a second line out of this chapter, and it runs through one phrase in verse 19. *Hang you on a tree.* The man who hangs in this chapter is guilty, and everyone at the feast knows it. Paul reaches for that same language to describe the one man who was 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).

Don't press either picture past what it will bear. Joseph isn't a type of Christ in this chapter; he's a prisoner asking a favor from a man who forgot him. But it keeps turning up, and the last time it does, the innocent man in the middle answers the request himself.

Applying the Text

God's route to the throne room ran through a demotion. Joseph managed an estate, then managed a prison, then got handed back down to carry meals for two inmates. That last assignment, the smallest and most humiliating of the three, is the only one that put him in a room with a man who would someday stand beside Pharaoh. Neither of his promotions did. Nobody gets told that in advance. You can't work it out from inside the demotion.

Learn to ask people why they look like that. *Why do you look so sad today?* Seven words, from a man with far more reason to be miserable than either of them. Joseph had every excuse to walk in, do his job, and notice nothing. Look around at the people you see every week. Somebody's face changed a few Sundays ago and nobody has said a word about it.

Ask for help. It isn't a failure of faith. Joseph says interpretations belong to God, and six verses later he asks a man to pull strings for him. Genesis puts the trust and the request in the same paragraph and sees no conflict between them. Praying about a problem doesn't excuse you from picking up the phone about it.

Somebody has to be the one who tells them. The baker asked, and Joseph gave him three days and a tree. He gained nothing by it and risked the little he had. Most of us have somebody who's going to hear the comfortable half of what they need and never the rest. Everyone who loves them has quietly agreed that kindness means silence. It's a decision we make on their behalf and never tell them we made.

Don't build your hope on somebody's memory. The cupbearer wasn't cruel. He was busy, and grateful, and then he was gone. If you're waiting on a person to come through for you the way you'd come through for them, that wait can go on a long time, and their forgetting may not even be a sin. God has not forgotten you. That's a different sentence from *God will fix this by Tuesday*, and Joseph had to live on the difference for two more years.

For Discussion

1. The only place in fourteen chapters where Joseph says how his situation feels is 40:14–15. What exactly does he claim there, and who does he never blame?

2. Joseph tells two Egyptians that interpretations belong to God before he has interpreted anything (40:8). Why say that out loud to men who don't know his God?
3. The cupbearer forgot. Was that a sin, or just an ordinary man with a lot on his mind? Does your answer change the way verse 23 reads?
4. Joseph asked for kindness and got two years of silence. When have you asked someone for help you had every right to expect, and never heard back? What did that do to the way you prayed?
5. Who is waiting on you right now for something you said you would do and then stopped thinking about?
6. Moses leaves the two years after verse 23 completely blank. Why do you think he did, and what would be lost if he'd filled it in?

Looking Ahead

Lesson 4: Raised Up by God (Genesis 41)

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

Before you come: read Genesis 41 straight through and count how many times Joseph puts God's name in front of a king who believed he was one.

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.