

Joseph interprets two dreams

- Genesis 40
- I said last week to the children that Joseph wouldn't have been in shackles. Well, I was partly wrong, I think, which is better than what I often tend to be. I was reading the word "confined" in chapter 39 verse 20 as, he was inside prison walls and his freedom had been severely restricted. But the word literally means there and in verse 3 of this chapter, "fastened," or "kept in bonds." That's what the Psalmist confirms in Psalm 105:17-19. We saw last week that though Joseph was falsely accused and put in prison, he did not lose faith. We will see that today in how he responds to the two important cellmates who join him. Remember when we talked about Markan sandwiches, how in the Gospel of Mark the writer would sandwich the main point of a passage between two stories? This is a Joseph sandwich where the main point, the appeal, is placed between two stories. Let's look at the passage under three main points: The Cupbearer's dream, The Appeal, and The Baker's dream.
- **The Cupbearer's Dream (verses 1-13)**
- The chapter opens with an introduction to two important officers of the king, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker. What do you think of when you hear "cupbearer to a king?" Right, Nehemiah! He had a huge influence on Artaxerxes, a pagan king. The cupbearer to a king had many responsibilities, not the least of which was opening and tasting the king's wine before it was served to the monarch. He was responsible for the quality of all that was presented to the king. He also put his life on the line as poisoning of kings was not uncommon. The chief baker was the head chef and responsible for the food that was served to the king. This meant that the quality of the food *and* the gastronomical results from the food were on him. These men had done something to deeply offend Pharaoh and incur his wrath. Perhaps he had a bad reaction to a meal and suspected these two for plotting to take him out. We are not told, just that they are now in the prison, and whom does the captain of the guard call on to serve these two? Joseph. We could look at this in two ways. One way is to say that Joseph had been in charge of the prison before this, but now he is called to be a servant to these two officials. From the top to the bottom. That could be a discouragement to faith. Or we could say that Joseph has been given an opportunity by God to show himself faithful, despite his circumstances. I believe the evidence strongly suggests Joseph looked at it like that. His whole time in prison was an opportunity to demonstrate his faith in God's absolute sovereignty in all things.
- Shodankeh Johnson is this year's winner of the William Wilberforce Award for leadership and courage as a Christian, given out by the Colson Center. His work as a pastor, church planter, and reformer has brought transformation in his home country of Sierra Leone. But it has also brought imprisonment and persecution. The pastor wrote, *One of the times that I was arrested, I came to the point of almost death because my hands were tied behind my back, and this commander was going to kill me, and he was furious. He said, "I'm going to kill you, and when I kill you, go and tell your God what you have been talking about. Your God cannot save you. You are already a dead man anyway." So, in that pain, I just bowed down my head, and I said, "God, please, if this is my time to die, I'm ready to go. But please God, give me courage so that I can talk to this commander. ... At least if I go down, let me convert one more person for you, and let it be this commander. And so, I lifted my head, and I said, "Commander, please, I know you are going to shoot me, but please give me five minutes so that I can talk to you." He said, "Go ahead and talk any nonsense. You're already a dead man anyway." And I said, "Commander, please ... I want you to accept Jesus as your Lord and personal Savior. Because, you know, if you shoot me right now, there are angels all around waiting to take me to heaven. But if you die, commander, in this state, you will not make it to Heaven. Right now, if you accept Jesus as your Lord and personal Savior, and then you turn around and shoot me, you know, Jesus will still forgive you." And he looked at me, and looked at me, and he told his boys, "Untie this man. Let him go. Something is wrong with his head. He's not a normal man." So, I was untied, and they let me go. But a few weeks down the road, the commander came looking for me. And when he came, he said, "Do you know that the way you spoke to me that day, nobody has ever spoken to me like that? I go to bed, and I can't sleep. Can we be friends?" ... and through*

that friendship, the commander got saved and baptized, and two of his guys also were baptized. And today the commander is still alive. He's a follower of Jesus, and two of his boys are also serving the Lord.

- Joseph served the same God, who turns suffering into open doors to ministry. The opportunity came one night when the cupbearer and baker had separate dreams and were troubled by them. Their faces told the story, but it could have ended there. Joseph could have said, "So sad, too bad, I don't know what your problems are, but they cannot possibly be like mine. You must have messed up royally, no pun intended, but I did absolutely nothing wrong." In other words, their bad faces and bad moods could have served as an irritation to Joseph, like they are sometimes to us. But instead it was an invitation to Joseph to see how he could serve. So he simply asked a question: "Why are your faces downcast today?" It's a question without judgment. And Joseph is not asking it to pass the time or just to make conversation. He wants to know how he can help. Opportunity given and received! Somebody said once that we walk by more ministry opportunities in a day than we could even imagine. Joseph didn't walk past but stopped to see if he could help. Their answer is they are sad because they both had dreams and "there is no one to interpret them." Derek Kidner writes that "it was common belief in Egypt that they (dreams) were predictive, and a body of writing grew up on the art of interpreting them." Joseph knew something about dreams, didn't he? So he utters the foundational truth that would ultimately propel him to the #2 man in Egypt: "Do not interpretations belong to God?" If God is sovereign over all, that includes dreams. It doesn't mean that every dream has theological implications. The vast majority of them do not. But some do, as we see in the Bible.
- Joseph says, "Please tell them to me." In other words, "Hey, I'm not God, but I *know* Him!" God gave Joseph an opportunity to be faithful in another small thing, to interpret these two dreams, and to demonstrate his faith in God, which is never a small thing. But this will also give him more confidence two years later when God will call on him to do something much bigger, when the Pharaoh has a couple of dreams.
- The cupbearer tells his vineyard-themed dream and Joseph immediately receives from the Lord what the interpretation is. Please don't try this at home. If the Lord wants you to understand a dream you had (or even more dangerous, a dream someone *else* had), he will make it plain to you, and it will always, always, line up with the truth of God's Word.
- Good news, Joseph says to the cupbearer. *In three days you will be restored by the Pharaoh. Back to work by his side will you go!* That leads us to...

- **The Appeal (verses 14-15)**

- The meat of the dream sandwich is Joseph's appeal to the cupbearer. Joseph has just told the cupbearer that his life will not only be spared but that he will be lifted up to the place where he was before. He asks the cupbearer twice, same Hebrew word, to be *remembered*. "Only remember me." I am asking one thing of you, that you remember me. The word can also be translated "mention," and it is later in the verse. "Please do me the kindness to mention me to Pharaoh." Remember me. Mention me to the one who has all authority in Egypt. Joseph is not asking for a position in Pharaoh's house! He would have been happy just to go back to being a slave, but without the chains. And he makes his case to the cupbearer with verse 15. First, I was stolen out of my land. I am a Hebrew from the land where the Hebrews live but was stolen away and ended up here. Not only that, Second, I have done nothing that they should put me into the pit. Joseph was innocent when thrown into the first pit and sold and he was innocent when he was thrown into this pit and left to die. "I am suffering without a cause," he says. Peter wrote, "But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps." (1 Peter 2:20-21)
- Joseph's suffering points to Christ's. And the test of Joseph's character and his trust in God will continue. That leads to...

- **The Baker's dream (verses 16-18)**
- It is a good thing the cupbearer shared first, because if the baker had gone first, the sandwich might be missing the meat. But God who is sovereign over all made sure of the order. Encouraged by a favorable interpretation, the chief baker confidently shares his dream, and this is where a Disney movie turns into a horror movie. This one is for the birds, a Hitchcockian nightmare where birds are swarming around and eating out of a basket on top of the baker's head. Birds are not always symbols of evil in the Bible, and Jesus himself used them to demonstrate simple faith in God's provision. But the only other time in Genesis I can remember there are birds swarming around trying to eat something was in chapter 15 when God cut a covenant with Abraham. The birds of prey were swooping down to eat the sacrifice, and Abraham drove them away. In this case, the interpretation is deadly serious.
- The baskets are three days, Joseph tells the baker, and the baker gets excited. Just like the cupbearer, good things will happen in three days! In three days, Joseph says, Pharaoh will lift up your head. A slight pause, and again the baker is thrilled, because that's what he had said to the cupbearer. **From you**, Joseph said. "And hang you on a tree." Whoa, Joe! The baker is bug-eyed, wild with fear as Joseph describes his final moment. The baker will hang and birds will feast.
- Three days later, everything plays out exactly the way Joseph described it. Every detail of the dream, as Joseph had told these two men. God gave him the meaning and through this, God gave Joseph hope and courage that his days in this prison were numbered. But not like Joseph imagined it, I'm sure.
- We read the last verse and we don't understand how the cupbearer could have forgotten Joseph. There is no human explanation for it. Don't you think one of the first things you would have told everybody, the Pharaoh, the officers of the court, your family, your friends, and perfect strangers is that you had this dream in prison and a Hebrew man in prison told you it meant you would be released and your life spared!? And that the man was exactly right about you and about the poor baker. If this happened today, there would be a book written in 30 days and a documentary about it in 6 months. **Dream Whisperer! On sale at bookstores everywhere.** But no. This is the Bible, and it is true. "Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph but forgot him."
- Do you know who did NOT forget Joseph? The God who created the universe and holds everything in his hands. The Son of God of whom Paul wrote, "And he is before all things, and in him, all things hold together." (Colossians 1:17) The Psalmist wrote, "The steps of a man are established by the LORD, when he delights in his way; though he fall, he shall not be cast headlong, for the LORD upholds his hand." (Psalm 37:23-24) George Mueller used to say, "the *stops* of a man are also established by the Lord." Joseph was walking toward the prison door for an early exit, but God stopped him. We don't know anything about those two years while his feet were hurt with fetters and his neck was rubbed raw by a collar of iron. But God was faithful. And Joseph did not lose hope. He still believed that the dreams he had as a young man would come true. He is about to see how God will unfold that for him.
- 1- Ever feel like you have been wrongly treated? We all have! When that happens, how can we respond in a way that honors God and points other to Christ?
- 2- A man plans his way, but God orders his steps, and sometimes his stops. How have you seen that work itself out in your own life?
- Prayer
- Communion
- Greet One Another