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# The Ups and Downs of God's Providence

## Genesis 40

**Introduction** It's a roller coaster sometimes. Our lives are not this even experience of lightly mingled joys and pains. Now it interests me that we will pay lots of money, stand in long lines in blistering heat, be strapped in an uncomfortable seat all for the thrill of a roller coaster ride. We yell and scream – our hearts are up in our mouths and then down in our boots. As it judders to a stop at the end, "O, let's go again." But let life be like this, we are not quite so thrilled. We yell and scream – for it to stop. But the simple reality is that God's providences are sometimes slow long climbs and sometimes quick savage falls with nasty unexpected turns and twists.

So, how do we serve well when hope is hard? How will you remain faithful, obedient, sweet, and joyous when the ride is not thrilling? When the providences of God seem to be dumping you down into deep dark tunnels and pits?

Well, what is God up to? For many centuries the primary weapon in warfare was a sword. In different times, different swords were prized for their design and their manufacture. In Roman days, the double edged Roman short sword was favored and feared across most of the known world. In the dark ages, the Muslim armies were armed with long curved scimitars that swung like hard guillotines in the hands of skilled warriors. Owning a fine Toledo blade was the dream of every soldier and nobleman during the Renaissance. Famed for their weight, heft, reach and edge, to this day Toledo blades are sought after by collectors and fencers. Britain's mighty world-spanning armies carried the grand Wilkinson sword mark on blades of several varying designs. Today, Marines long to be handed the sword that marks an officer of distinction. In all these, whatever their design and whoever their manufacturer, the sharpness and durability of their edge was the key. [Adapted from Kent Hughes, *Genesis*].

This is what God is doing in the difficult times – He is forging and sharpening His sword for effective and durable use. God has taken Joseph from Canaan to Egypt. He has been sold into slavery to an Egyptian court military officer named Potiphar. Serving with distinction brought him the unwanted advances of Potiphar's wife. His rejection of her led to a false accusation of rape. The next long stroke of the sharpening steel sends Joseph to a prison, still under the watchful eye of Potiphar.

Here is another of those Hebrew linguistic structures that provide the key to the text. This is the parallel structure called by its Greek name, a chiasm. The outline in the sermon and on the PowerPoint reflects that structure. Allen Ross in *Creation and Blessing* (p.631) points out how this structure makes this chapter a unit. At the center then of the story is the appeal to be remembered and the pathos of being forgotten.

In all these things, Joseph is remaining faithful to God and caring about people even in the ups and downs of God's providences.

## **A Change: Meeting in Difficult Times (v.1-4)**

What long years are wrapped up in this simple phrase, “sometime after this.” Joseph is 17 when sold into slavery, 28 when this chapter takes place for 2 years later, he is 30 when he becomes prime-minister. We do not know how long he was in Potiphar’s house. But we know that from going down to Egypt and to the events of this chapter is 11 years. Think back 11 years ago in your life. Imagine if all you could remember was slavery and prison.

Here in the bottom of the prison (referred to here as the “pit”) Joseph is still faithful and obedient. But now, he is given the responsibility to take care of two felons. These men were the Pharaoh’s cupbearer and baker. Both of them were charged with the responsibility in Pharaoh’s court of ensuring that the Pharaoh was not poisoned by his enemies. That both of them are imprisoned implies that they were implicated in a conspiracy to commit regicide, the murder of ruler. It may well have been, given the capriciousness of rulers, that these two had offended the Pharaoh by simply some casual comments or jokes made in the pursuit of their work in the kitchens and courts that got back to the Pharaoh.

Nevertheless, here they are, political prisoners at the bottom of the prison rungs. However, they are put in the custody of Potiphar who installed them in the prison where Joseph was. He was assigned to them to attend to them. What a nice reward for faithfulness and diligence. Here are two mighty who have fallen from a chief position to a dire circumstance. They are now Joseph’s responsibility.

It is a bit difficult to parse the phrases here: “custody in Potiphar’s house” seems to imply something different than “in the prison where Joseph was”. Whether this means that Joseph was moved to a prison on Potiphar’s property or whether this means that Potiphar was assigned to his custody and then he put them in the same prison Joseph is in is unclear – I prefer the second. The cupbearer and baker are in the *custody* of Potiphar and in the *confinement* of prison. Either way, this involves a big change for Joseph. He has been responsible for the whole prison under the warden. Now he is responsible for these two prisoners. Now this is not a duty filled with honor. They are not Enron executives in paradise-prison. They are basically on death row, as we later find out. This is another step down, another hard providence. Here is temptation to slump and shrivel or opportunity to serve faithfully.

## **B Care: The Inquiry into the Dreams (v.5-8)**

So how will Joseph treat them? Would you not be tempted to be harsh, to see them as the cause of this piece of your trouble? Wouldn’t it be easy not to empty the chamber pot every day? To clamp the chains on just a bit too tight? To be sure the ticking has just a few bugs in it? The food a little colder and greasier? We all would find ourselves just a bit hard eyed and callus, wishing them harm.

But Joseph retains his compassion, his care for people. These two have a restless night in which they have dreams, both of them. Egyptians put great stock in dreams. They believed that when you slept, you were in touch with the spirit realm. Dreams were messages from the gods inhabiting that realm. But in order for dreams to be interpreted, you need access to a priest or priestess who would use a set of Dream Books to unlock the codes and hidden mes-

sages in your dreams. Obviously, this is not going to happen while confined in prison. So they awaken in the morning distressed and shaken.

Joseph sees their countenance and is concerned. You can well imagine that these men were at the edge of their ropes. Their shuffling walk and downcast faces, their mumbled words and anxious looks all spoke volumes to Joseph. So he inquires. He moves into their lives with a simple question. They explain their dilemma. They have had dreams that surely are full of meaning but have no way to interpret them. What will they do?

Joseph responds by directly challenging their idolatry and paganism. Dreams do not belong to the realm of idols. Dreams that truly are clear communication from deity are from the Lord God. They belong to Him. As a servant of the Most High and Only God, who owns dreams and speaks through them in prophetic vision, then tell Joseph the dream.

As one commentator puts it, Joseph has a “God-reflex”. He is living constantly before the face of God. He seems to respond to situation after situation with God-talk. He is not embarrassed or ashamed. You have a dream? I have a God who interprets. You are downcast and disheartened, how can I connect you with my God?

Now is not the time to get wrapped up in some theology of dreams and interpretations. We know that God has chosen at specific points and times to communicate through dreams and visions. These all were in the category of revelation and required interpretation. With a sufficient word today, your dreams probably more reflect the state of your stomach and the state of your soul than any stream of words from God.

### **C Encouragement: Cupbearer’s Dream (v.9-13)**

The cupbearer begins by giving his dream. It is interesting that the dream is in the realm of his own experience and concerns. He sees a grape vine as it blossoms, then buds and finally produces grapes. He sees himself pressing out the grapes into Pharaoh’s serving cup and then placing the cup in Pharaoh’s hand.

Ah, you can almost see Joseph smile. The blindness of the cupbearer’s ignorance and idolatry keeps him from understanding what actually is pretty plain. Those who worship God often have a clearer understanding of what is plain but hidden from the wicked. So he interprets the dream – in three days, the cupbearer will be restored.

Now this is an encouraging word. Notice how he puts it. The cupbearer will be lifted up and restored to his former place and position of honor and service. This is no grudging, jealous, short word from Joseph. This is good news in good words with good effect.

**D Appeal: The Plea to be Remembered (v.14-15)**

Ah, but Joseph will now have a friend in high places. So he makes an appeal, a plea to be remembered.

The appeal is for the cupbearer to remember him when he is restored. He will be serving once again in the Pharaoh's court. He will even have the eye and ear of the Pharaoh. His appeal is for a return in kindness. He has treated him well when most would not. He has interpreted his dream solely as a witness for God and the good of the man. So when you are there and rejoice in the good of restoration, think of me and speak of me.

Joseph's appeal points to the injustice of his situation. He has done no wrong. The cupbearer will certainly understand this. He also has been wrongly incarcerated. He knows this place and its pains. Joseph has suffered much more. He has been sold and now falsely accused and unjustly imprisoned. "Please, you know what this is like," he seems to say. "You were wronged. I have been wronged. I don't deserve to be in this land. I don't deserve to be in this prison. Please don't forget me and do bring me to Pharaoh's attention so that I may get out of here."

What is clear here that Joseph is not a fatalist – he is not simply resigned that his present place is an irreversible fate. He is seeking a way out while serving faithfully in his place. This is a difficult tension to sustain. But this is the Bible's idea of faithfulness. It is a patient obedience while waiting with hope for God to move and taking opportunities as wisdom dictates.

**C Warning: The Baker's Dream (v.16-19)**

The baker hears the wonderful news for his friend and is encouraged to tell his own dream and get its interpretation. His dream, like the cupbearer's is about the familiar things of his former life and position. He had dreamed that he was carrying three large bread baskets on his head. These were full of bread baked for the Pharaoh. But as he is walking along, the birds are coming to rest on top basket and are eating the bread from it.

This dream is not as clear on its surface. Generally, in the Scriptures and in revelation, birds are seen as symbols of evil or ill fortune. Joseph does not shrink back from telling this interpretation either. He is committed to tell the truth as God has given it, no matter how hard it may be. This dream is warning the baker that in three days he will be executed in ignominy by the Pharaoh.

While this is not what the baker wanted to hear, it is still the truth. It is what God is communicating. We, like Joseph, must be committed to telling the truth, yes in love, but still telling the truth even when it is not what people want to hear. It is the responsibility of God's people to represent

God's agenda. Hard truth is still truth. It is unkind, unloving and in many cases, sinful to withhold the truth when we ought to give it.

## **B Success: The Fulfillment of the Dreams (v.20-22)**

Joseph's interpretation and thus his standing as a spokesman from God and an interpreter of God's revelation is authenticated as the events unfold. In the Bible, a person claiming to speak to God and prophesying the future was required to be absolutely correct. Even those who could work attesting miracles were still stoned if their prophecies did not come true.

But what Joseph predicted comes to pass. These two dreams and their interpretation unfold just as he said. Three days after making the interpretation, the Pharaoh gives a birthday party. He makes a feast for all his servants to enjoy in his honor. He remembers these two. He may also have confirmation of the innocence of the cup bearer and guilt of the baker.

What a moment it must have been deep down in that prison. The tramp of feet in the hall, the clanging of keys in the door. The cup bearer is handed his clothes and staff of office. He is told to wash and anoint himself. Afterward he is join the festivities in the Pharaoh's court and be restored. But, hear the sinking heart and groans of the baker. If one is restored as Joseph said, then his fate is sealed. It is time to die. So the dying tread of steps down the hall lead that prisoner to be impaled on a stake, hung on a tree. Writhing in pain, covered in blood and shame, he dies.

## **A Pain: Being Forgotten in Good Times (v.23)**

Joseph watches as his interpretations unfold into reality. Wonder if he recalls his earlier dreams? Wonder if he considers that they may still unfold? Is this the source of his hope and steadfastness? Has he hoped in God who has pointed through those dreams to some unimaginable success and restoration in the future? Ah, can he now see the horizon of freedom? Does he pray and praise as the cup bearer with light step marches to return and restoration?

Ah what a sad line. How quickly hope fades. How soon pain returns as a familiar friend. Joseph is forgotten. The whetstone of God's sharpening is once again running over the edge of His being forged sword. For two long years he waits, forgotten. For two long years God continues to forge and make His man ready. But be assured, it is not easy. But he will wait. He will wait with patience and obedience. He will move toward His God. He will not become bitter or angry or downcast. He will become a sharp and bright sword no matter how hot and hard the forge may be.

Joseph models for us the deep inner peace and steady dependence on God when it may seem unbearable. The ups and downs of God's providences are not just endured, but rather actively embraced and met with courage and compassion. Joseph is an example for us whose life was written for our instruction to point us to Christ and to practical godliness. (1 Corinthians 10) **Lessons**

Let's take what we have observed and link the words together as a guide for steadiness and faithfulness in the midst of the mess.

- CHANGE* Recognize that the changes God brings are opportunities for new relationships, responsibilities and realities. In your changing circumstance, who are the new people to meet? What deft strategy of God has wrought this change for your good and His glory?
- CARE* Keep a focus on people around you, particularly those with cares and concerns. When it is darkest and you want to be cared for, this is the time to look away from yourself to care for others. Even on the cross, Jesus cares for His mom. Don't let darkness blind you to others.
- ENCOURAGEMENT* Be willing to serve others well in a way that uses truth to encourage and motivate them. Make truth the way you share hope and keep others encouraged.
- APPEAL* Recognize opportunities for change without making escape the primary aim and without manipulating people.
- WARNING* Be willing to serve others well in a way that uses truth to exhort and warn them. Be so committed to truth that you will not shrink back from it even though it is not what they want or even hope to hear.
- SUCCESS* Be humble and joyful in the midst of successes. Even when things are very hard, recognize that gifts, skills and experiences are being given for ministry to others. You may well be receiving authentication as well as ability.
- PAIN* Be willing to endure pain, loneliness, disappointment and discouragement while waiting for the purposes and plans of God to unfold. Align yourself with God's agenda. The trajectory may be a long one with its end out of sight – so look to it with faith and hope.

For the glory and joy set before Him, Jesus endures the cross. So should we. In the midst of the ups and downs of God's good and wise providences, be faithful and obedient, before the face of God.