

June 24, 2007

**SERIES:** Joseph: From Pit to Prominence  
**SERMON:** When Your Friends Forget You  
**SCRIPTURE:** Genesis 40  
**SPEAKER:** Pastor Dick High

**Introduction:** The Biblical account of the life of Joseph is a portion of Scripture that is among my favorites. The primary reason is that these chapters in Genesis provide vivid reminders that God is always at work to accomplish His purposes in my life as a believer. I need that affirmation. I need the assurance that He does care and that He can be trusted, especially when life does not appear to make a great deal of sense.

Granted, we have the advantage of looking over Joseph's shoulder, so to speak, as he proceeds through life. Beyond that, the timeframes are significantly condensed, which allows us the opportunity to more readily see the big picture.

As we proceed today in our sermon series from the life of Joseph we will be in Genesis 40. It is the account of Joseph interpreting dreams of two fellow prisoners. As we look at that specific situation, it is my desire that our confidence deepens in God's care for the believer amid challenging circumstances. Additionally, I want us to embrace the fact that in such circumstances, the development of our faith and character is very much of interest to God.

## The Story Continues

I am going to ask that we stand together as I read the first eight verses of Genesis 40. It is the continuation of a story that begins late in chapter 39. The setting is in an Egyptian prison, specifically *the place where the king's prisoners were confined* (39:20).

*1 Some time later, the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt offended their master, the king of Egypt. 2 Pharaoh was angry with his two officials, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker, 3 and put them in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, in the same prison where Joseph was confined. 4 The captain of the guard assigned them to Joseph, and he attended them. After they had been in custody for some time, 5 each of the two men—the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt, who were being held in prison—had a dream the same night, and each dream had a meaning of its own. 6 When Joseph came to them the next morning, he saw that they were dejected. 7 So he asked Pharaoh's officials who were in custody with him in his master's house, "Why are your faces so sad today?" 8 "We both had dreams," they answered, "but there is no one to interpret them." Then Joseph said to them, "Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell me your dreams."*

The first area of interest that I want to consider today is Joseph's age at this time. From chapter 41 we know that he will be thirty years old when he is placed in a prime minister-like position in Egypt. We also know from chapter 37 that he is seventeen years old when he is sold as a slave by his brothers. There are three other phrases in between that help us piece together at least an estimated timeline.

First, at the end of chapter 40 we can determine that Joseph is twenty-eight years old. It is actually the first phrase in chapter 41 that allows us to do that. There we are told of a two-year gap after the conclusion of chapter 40. (Simple math:  $30 - 2 = 28$ ) Second, as we go backwards through chapter 40 we find a phrase at the end of verse 4 – *After they had been in custody for some time...* Although an indefinite description of time, some believe that phrase to cover a period of two or perhaps three years. If we use the shorter suggestion, we could realistically conclude that Joseph is twenty-six years old when the cupbearer and baker

are placed under his care. Third, if we back up to the beginning verse of chapter 40, we find a similar phrase – *some time later...* On the same premise as used previously, we can conclude that Joseph is no more than twenty-four years old as we transition into chapter 40.

Why is that important? Knowing Joseph's age provides us with a key Biblical example of God's work in the life of a young adult. Although it is a generalized observation, many individuals we encounter in the Old Testament are older adults. Along with David, Samuel, Jeremiah, and Josiah, the life of Joseph lets us see God's hand at work in the life of someone in the earlier years of life. For anyone here today from their teen years and older, although it can be argued that our situation is vastly different from Joseph's, God's desire is to work in our life for His purposes, just as intently as we can observe Him doing in Joseph's life. We should not put God off until we're older! He wants to refine our character, deepen our faith, and give us a sense of direction now!. He desires that our life have impact for His purposes now! So as we look now into the events of Genesis 40, bear that in mind (even if I am some three decades past my mid twenties!).

If I were to give a subtitle to this time in Joseph's life, I would use the words "successful inmate." We know from the latter part of chapter 39 that Joseph has been given significant oversight responsibilities in prison. We are given a specific example of that in chapter 40. What is of particular interest here is that Joseph was over individuals who in other circumstances would have had position above his. Joseph's highest "status" in Egypt had been as a slave, although one with significant freedom and responsibility. Yet, when two of Pharaoh's officials are placed in this same prison, they are placed under Joseph's supervision. Noting this gives a better understanding of what it means when the text states that God was with Joseph while he was in prison and that God gave him success in whatever he did.

So he is a "successful inmate." But he is still an inmate; he is in prison. It is this reality that is clearly emphasized in the early verses of Genesis 40. From verse 1 through the middle of verse 4, we get a good description of what has occurred with regard to two of Pharaoh's officials. These men are in the same prison as Joseph, under his supervision. What I want to do is read again from the middle of verse 4 through verse 7. In doing so, I will omit selected phrases. The text will reflect what I read (with the smaller font, placed in parentheses, indicating what text I have omitted).

*After they had been ~~there in custody~~ for some time, 5 each of the two men—~~the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt, who were being held in prison~~—had a dream the same night, and each dream had a meaning of its own. 6 When Joseph came to them the next morning, he saw that they were dejected. 7 So he asked Pharaoh's officials ~~who were in custody with him in his master's house~~, "Why are your faces so sad today?"*

What's my point? We know that these men are in custody, in prison, where Joseph is. We are clearly told that in the first 3 ½ verses. Why is that fact repeated and emphasized? I believe that this emphasis is to help us understand that, at least from certain perspectives, this is a low point in Joseph's life. Beginning in Genesis 37, where we are introduced to Joseph as a favored son (albeit in a dysfunctional setting), we have subsequently seen him as a hated brother, then a slave, and now an inmate in prison! And with notable emphasis that this is the situation in which he currently finds himself!

So what is Joseph's perspective? We get a glimpse of that as we move further into the chapter. I will begin reading at verse 9. *9 So the chief cupbearer told Joseph his dream. He said to him, "In my dream I saw a vine in front of me, 10 and on the vine were three branches. As soon as it budded, it blossomed, and its clusters ripened into grapes. 11 Pharaoh's cup was in my hand, and I took the grapes, squeezed them into Pharaoh's cup and put the cup in his hand." 12 "This is what it means," Joseph said to him. "The three branches are three days. 13 Within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your position, and you will put Pharaoh's cup in his hand, just as you used to do when you were his cupbearer. 14*

*But when all goes well with you, remember me and show me kindness; mention me to Pharaoh and get me out of this prison. 15 For I was forcibly carried off from the land of the Hebrews, and even here I have done nothing to deserve being put in a dungeon."*

Is Joseph depressed? I don't think so. Is he unnecessarily dwelling on his situation? No, I don't think that is the case. Does he desire that things be different? Certainly! Do I have concerns about that? No. Is he seeking to implement his own solution to his circumstances, leaving God out of the picture? No, I don't believe that either. (No more than Paul's appeal to Rome was the means by which he end up in that city.) But, he is in prison. He knows what circumstances have brought him here. Would he like to be out of prison? Of course! That is a legitimate desire. And he seeks to make appropriate use of an important opportunity.

Notice the repetition in verse 14 within his request to Pharaoh's cupbearer. It is fourfold: "remember me," "show me kindness," "mention me," and "get me out..." The request to be remembered uses a word that envisions not just mental activity but also appropriate external actions. The request to be shown kindness uses a significant Scriptural word often translated as *mercy* or *love* (or) *lovingkindness*. It is a term that conveys a connection between individuals where mutual loyalty is the basis of their relationship. One definition of the term states that it describes "the consistent, ever-faithful, relentless, constantly-pursuing, extravagant, unrestrained, furious love of our Father God!" That may be a bit of an overstatement when applied to a human relationship, but it does give focus to the breadth and depth of the word. This is a significant request. Further, Joseph asks to be mentioned to Pharaoh. This is a repetition of the initial word of his request, translated with a different English word in the NIV. To so translate gives emphasis to the action portion of the request. It will be of no value to Joseph if all that the cupbearer does is remember Joseph, this conversation, and the interpretation of the dream; then does nothing or says nothing about that. The final request is for release. And it occurs as a specific form of the Hebrew verb that indicates Joseph's dependence upon outside action to change his circumstances. His dependence, I believe, is ultimately upon God to bring that change. But could this possibly be the means? The word conveys the concept that if the cupbearer will do as requested, that could be the cause of Joseph being brought out from prison. (By the way, the term is commonly used when later speaking of the exodus from Egypt.) Joseph is making request for specific actions which he believes could be the cause of his exodus from prison. I think this detailed and deliberate request highlights how clearly Joseph understands his circumstances.

Was Joseph's request honored? Let's read the remaining verses in Genesis 40 to find out. *16 When the chief baker saw that Joseph had given a favorable interpretation, he said to Joseph, "I too had a dream: On my head were three baskets of bread. 17 In the top basket were all kinds of baked goods for Pharaoh, but the birds were eating them out of the basket on my head." 18 "This is what it means," Joseph said. "The three baskets are three days. 19 Within three days Pharaoh will lift off your head and hang you on a tree. And the birds will eat away your flesh." 20 Now the third day was Pharaoh's birthday, and he gave a feast for all his officials. He lifted up the heads of the chief cupbearer and the chief baker in the presence of his officials: 21 He restored the chief cupbearer to his position, so that he once again put the cup into Pharaoh's hand, 22 but he hanged the chief baker, just as Joseph had said to them in his interpretation. 23 The chief cupbearer, however, did not remember Joseph; he forgot him.*

That's not the most positive note on which to end the chapter; is it? I believe it would be a good translation to suggest this wording – *The chief cupbearer, however, chose not to act on Joseph's request; in fact he ignored doing so! WOW!*

I am usually optimistic in my outlook on life. I don't stay "down" for any period of time. But I acknowledge that, by themselves, these are not encouraging words. However, the overall picture of Joseph's life nearly shouts, "But God has not forgotten!" In fact, He is very much at work, both in the circumstances, and in Joseph's life. Let's step back into the chapter and observe some of what is occurring.

## Development of Skills and Refinement of Character

What I want to focus on is both the development of skills and the refinement of character. The overall picture that we will consider will notice administrative leadership, unselfishness, faith, and courage. Let's look at these individually.

We learn quite a bit about Joseph's administrative leadership in Genesis 39, both as a slave in Potipher's house and in prison. Our vantage point allows us to see the ultimate work that God has for Joseph in Egypt, so these opportunities and his skill development are important paths of preparation. We already know from the two situations in chapter 39 that Joseph fulfills his responsibilities so well, that both Potipher and the prison warden do not have to concern themselves with the quality of his work. Of course, we are reminded in both instances that God is an active cause and part of this skill development. Thus it is not surprising that in chapter 40, when two very prominent individuals from Pharaoh's officials are placed in jail, the warden does not hesitate to place them under Joseph's supervision.

In all of this I want to emphasize that although first a slave, and now a prisoner, both situations provide opportunity in which Joseph's skills in administrative leadership can develop, even though he does not know the ultimate unfolding of God's plans for him. In all circumstances it is appropriate to ask God to use what occurs for His purposes in our life, and as He desires, to use them in preparation for later work or ministry for Him. Could it be that some (of us) here today need that specific reminder? We may be at a transition point in our life (or will face one soon), and we are uncertain what lies ahead. Can we believe that God is absolutely not surprised by this? Can we believe that He has been at work in preparation for this transition? Can we walk away from this passage with our faith encouraged and strengthened? Joseph needed venues in which his skills of administrative leadership would be honed, because he had greater challenges and opportunities ahead. And God knew that!!!

Not only are his administrative and leadership skills being developed, God has been at work in the refinement of his character. I suggest that is occurring in three areas. First, Joseph has become an unselfish individual. That was certainly not a character trait observable in chapter 37. Much of what we are told about Joseph in chapter 37 revolves around a "what about me?" perspective. That has changed by chapter 40. It is most prominently suggested in three verbs found in the end of verse 3 and the beginning of verse 4: "confined," "assigned," and "attended." The first two verbs are actions over which he has no choice. They are the result of other's actions, and he cannot alter them. But the third verb reveals both a chosen action and the motivation behind it. This word is often translated as "minister" or "serve." When referring to service, it usually emphasizes personal service that is rendered to someone important. When used of ministry, it is often in the context of the priest fulfilling their ministry of worship, both to God, and as representatives of the people. The word usage conveys an attitude of humility, respect, and consideration of the honor of serving someone else. In the context of Genesis 40, this attitude within Joseph is evident in what we are told in verse 6. Joseph is observant toward individuals assigned to his care. The actual word is used earlier in 39:23 (The warden paid no attention...) In 40:6 we are told that Joseph paid attention; he "saw" that these two individuals were dejected. He noticed. He looked beyond just the facial expression. He took initiative and expressed care. He is not just filling a position or fulfilling a responsibility.

When we invite God (we need to do that repeatedly) into the midst of our hard circumstances, a softening can occur in our hearts. That transformation is effected not just because time has passed or we grow older. It is a testimony to God's gracious presence molding our character, steering us away from resentment or bitterness. Joseph demonstrates genuine, unselfish care for those placed under his supervision. He initiates a conversation that evidences that care, and invites interaction that may allow him to serve individuals that he could have a number of reasons to resent.

The second area of character development to observe is Joseph's faith in God. It is expressed most distinctly in the statement he makes in verse 8. Here is what I note: This statement is a contrast to what we can observe in Genesis 37. In that context, as Joseph discusses his dreams, there is no mention of God at all. At most, we have an implied interpretation that Joseph himself may have given. Here in Genesis 40 there is a concise and specific acknowledgement that the interpretation of dreams is something that belongs in God's hand, that interpreting dreams is something that He (and He alone) can accomplish. Some of the depth of this conviction in Joseph's life is demonstrated in his next statement, "Tell me your dreams." He believes God can and will interpret these dreams. Now one thing the text does not tell us specifically, but that I believe can be stated, is that as Joseph makes this statement, it is likely that God has not yet revealed to Joseph the interpretation of his own dreams. Somewhere during the last twelve years of his life he has come to understand that while he may have had his own interpretation (and there was some degree of accuracy to that) the full and true interpretation is that which God alone can give. That is the conviction he now states in respect to the dreams of the cupbearer and baker, which by the way, he has not yet been told what they are!

I believe that what verse 8 reveals is a culmination of how Joseph has been responding to God throughout the events of Genesis 39. There we are told with repetition that the Lord was with Joseph, and that the Lord gave him success. As Joseph's faith grows, he verbalizes what he believes about God. And even though we have just a brief window of observation, I think we can see a clear faith. This faith is further evidenced in the conversation with the cupbearer that occurs in verse 14. Joseph believes that God can give the interpretation to this man's dream. He believes that the interpretation God gives is accurate and can be trusted to occur. Thus the statement in verse 14 – "But when all goes well with you..." This will occur! Joseph believes that events will unfold just as God has revealed.

But what about the other dream? As Joseph hears and interprets that dream, what can be observed? Think about this incident. The interpretation to the dream of the chief baker is negative. It is a death sentence! I would say that as Joseph relates the dreams interpretation we see that his faith in, and obedience to God is perhaps even more clearly evidenced. These would be hard words to speak. This was an individual who had been under Joseph's care for two years or more. This is an individual that Joseph cared enough about to inquire as to the reason for his being dejected. Yet, Joseph does not shy away from this task because he believes the interpretation God has given.

I believe that this is not just a testimony to his faith, but it is also a demonstration of courage. It would take courage to speak these words, and Joseph does so. We are not told of voice inflection or his countenance as he speaks. I believe that he spoke with as much graciousness as possible. But he did speak with courage! If you recall the incident from 37:2, we are told that Joseph brought back a bad report to his father regarding his brothers. Although he may have spoken truth, I would not consider courage to have been part of his character at that time. Joseph certainly is a changed individual!

When I see that God can craft this kind of change and maturing in someone's life I find hope and encouragement. That does not ignore the challenging circumstances that were used as tools in that process. But it looks beyond those to the gracious work of God in the life of a believer.

As we will soon come to the conclusion of today's message, I want to take time to emphasize and restate certain things about God that I believe it is important to carry with us from this chapter in the life of Joseph. They may be principles that we already know. Even then, it could be appropriate for us, in light of current circumstances, or attitudes, to reaffirm our desire to embrace the God that Genesis 40 reveals to us.

## **Principles to Embrace**

The first principle that I emphasize is that God desires to be actively at work in our life, regardless of age. Will you welcome that? As we noted, Joseph is a young man when these events occur. In fact, by age 24, there is already a significant history of God's work in his life. Does that reflect what you desire for your life? Will you welcome that? If you're 24, or 37, or 42, or 51, or 63, or 75, will you welcome that? Would it be appropriate for all of us today to verbalize to God our openness to let Him work in our life? Jesus Christ does stand at the door knocking. What is your response?

Consider these words from I Peter chapter 1 – 3: “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you, 5 who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. 6 In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. 7 These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.”

God desires that our faith grow. Is that our desire?

Let's consider a second principle. God seeks faithfulness, regardless of circumstances or position. Will you commit to that? The life of Joseph demonstrates that even when our dreams are not being fulfilled, we can pursue faithfulness to God, regardless of circumstances. That is certainly what God would desire from each of us. Faithfulness in obedience, in using our abilities and our spiritual gifts. Faithfulness in fulfilling responsibilities at work, with our finances. Faithfulness in marriage/family responsibilities. Faithfulness throughout all aspects of our life. Will we commit to that? May each of us ask God for His strength to be faithful?

Third: While appropriate to seek relief from unfavorable situations, we need to submit to God's timing in doing so. Is that something you need to do today? When we consider the circumstances in which Joseph finds himself, we can see that he bears some responsibility for being in Egypt, as a slave. His brothers and father also bear some of that responsibility. The fact that he is placed in prison, as we find him in Genesis 40, is clearly due to the actions of others. In his own words, he has done nothing to deserve that. One danger when we are in unfavorable situations is to become so focused on that which we believe to be unfair, that we don't consciously submit to God's timing in bringing us through or out of such situations. Do you have need today to redirect your focus from your circumstances to God?

The final principle I want to state is that God is sovereign and faithful at all times, and occasionally gives us glimpses which affirm these important truths. Praise Him! I do believe that God is sovereign and faithful. But I am very grateful for those occasions when God allows reminders, whether that is in my life or in the life of someone else. Such incidents can be times of powerful affirmation and assurance of truth.

As we conclude today, I want to share one such incident from the recent FrontLine Mission Exposure Trip to Guatemala. It was related to me by Pastor Dan Curnutt. He graciously put this account in written words, and I share it with you as we conclude.

“On Wednesday, June 13<sup>th</sup>, our team went to Pavon Prison to participate in a worship service with the prisoners. During the time I noticed a young man (about 30 years old) sitting down the row from me. He had a distinctive tattoo that I recognized. It was the 18th St. Harpies insignia. I had not seen this tattoo since leaving the inner city of Los Angeles in 1991.

After the service Dale Vick and I talked with this young man. He grew up in Los Angeles near 18th and Normandy. Karen and I lived at 24th and Juliet, less than two miles from where he grew up. He belonged to the 18th St. Harpies which was the rival gang to the Adams St. Harpies who controlled the area where Karen and I lived. His gang was responsible for the death of one of my club kids, Moises.

I shared with him that I had lived near him. When he realized where I had lived he was shocked. When I shared about Moises he was sad. He admitted that their gang had killed many kids in the gang from my neighborhood. I told him I loved him in the Lord and was grateful to see him in church.

He told us that he had been sent by his gang to Guatemala to assassinate a rival gang leader. He was successful in that contract but was caught by the authorities in Guatemala. He is serving 30 years for that murder. But he told us that God used his being caught to bring about good. In Pavon Prison he has found Jesus and his life is turned around. I told him that I would continue to pray for him as he lives for Christ in that Prison. With tears in our eyes we embraced, overjoyed with now being brothers in Christ.”

Friends, God is sovereign and faithful at all times. That is unalterable truth. That is the firm foundation upon which God desires us to face today and tomorrow, the known and the unknown, times of difficulty and times of ease, and whatever life brings into our path. Certainly He is to be praised!!

THANKS BE TO GOD!!!