Genesis 39-40 – Joseph in Slavery

Review

Last time, we looked at the somewhat distasteful story of Judah's sexual encounter with his widowed daughter-in-law Tamar. We discussed the ancient Hebrew tradition of levirate marriage in which a man whose brother died childless would take the brother's widow as his own wife so she could bear heirs for the dead brother. Although, the story of Judah and Tamar is a little repugnant to modern sensibilities, God used this encounter between Judah and Tamar to conceive their son Perez would become the progenitor of Mary the mother of Jesus.

Joseph in Potiphar's House

Now we pick up the story of Jacob's second-youngest son Joseph and his life of slavery in Egypt.

> ***1Now Joseph had been brought down to Egypt, and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, had bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there. 2The LORD was with Joseph, and he became a successful man, and he was in the house of his Egyptian master. 3His master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD caused all that he did to succeed in his hands. 4So Joseph found favor in his sight and attended him, and he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had. 5From the time that he made him overseer in his house and over all that he had, the LORD blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; the blessing of the LORD was on all that he had, in house and field. 6So he left all that he had in Joseph's charge, and because of him he had no concern about anything but the food he ate…*** **Genesis 39:1-6a (ESV)**

Recall from our study of Genesis 37 that Joseph's brothers had sold him to Midianite/Ishmaelite traders who were traveling through Dothan in Canaan from the land of Gilead east of the Jordan river down to Egypt. In that study, we noted that there was some question about exactly how Joseph ended up in the hands of the Ishmaelites who finally sold him to Potiphar the captain of the Egyptian guard.

But the details of exactly how Joseph ended up in Potiphar's house aren't important. What really matters is for us to recognize that God's hand was working all these things together so that He could use Joseph to rescue his family out of a famine that would soon engulf the entire region. Furthermore, God then used Israel to bring Jesus of Nazareth into the world for the rescue of all mankind out of death.

Here in Genesis 39:2-6, we see confirmation that God was at work in Joseph's life. In fact, God's blessings manifest in Joseph's life were obvious even to Joseph's new master Potiphar. This is truly amazing given that Potiphar was not himself a Hebrew or a follower of the one true and living God. Instead, Potiphar must have been an adherent to the Egyptian religious system (at least to outward appearances) under which even Pharaoh was considered a god. Nevertheless, Potiphar recognized God's hand in Joseph's life, and whether or not Potiphar became a believer in the God of Joseph, he at least saw the wisdom in going along with what God was doing in Joseph's life. For this, we see that God also blessed Potiphar and his household for Joseph's sake.

Potiphar's recognition of God's work in Joseph's life is reminiscent of the story of Peter and John who had been brought to trial before the Jewish council of leaders after they healed a lame man in the Name of Jesus and were found afterward preaching His Gospel. At the trial, Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit just as Jesus Himself had foretold.

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> 11 *And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say,* 12 *for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say."* **Luke 12:11-12 (ESV)**

The work of God's Spirit in the ministries of Peter and John and the power of the voice of the Holy Spirit speaking through Peter to the council was so evident that like Potiphar, the Jewish leaders couldn't help but recognize God's hand in it all.

> 13 *Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus.* 14 *But seeing the man who was healed standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition.* **Acts 4:13-14 (ESV)**

May the work and power of the Holy Spirit dwelling within us be so obvious to those around us that they too will not be able to deny that we have been with Jesus. But even so, let us not become disheartened if they undeniably recognize God's power within us but continue to deny Jesus as LORD. Remember Jesus' own encouragements.

> 44 *No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day.* **John 6:44 (ESV)**

> 16 *Then he said to the disciples, "Anyone who accepts your message is also accepting me. And anyone who rejects you is rejecting me. And anyone who rejects me is rejecting God, who sent me."* **Luke 10:16 (NLT)**

> 6b *Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance.* 7 *And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, "Lie with me."* 8 *But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Behold, because of me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my charge.* 9 *He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except you, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?"* 10 *And as she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not listen to her, to lie beside her or to be with her.* **Genesis 39:6b-10 (ESV)**

Recall from Genesis 37:2 that Joseph was seventeen years old when he brought a bad report to his father Jacob about his brothers Dan, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher. We have no way to determine how many years passed between that incident and Joseph's arrival in Egypt. Nor do we know how long Joseph served in Potiphar's house before Potiphar's wife started coming on to him. Although we know nothing about Potiphar's wife's age, we can safely surmise that Joseph was a young man in the very prime of his adulthood, while Potiphar's wife very likely was in middle age given the prominent position Potiphar held as captain of the guard. Nevertheless, Joseph might have been tempted to succumb to her advances, but he knew that doing so would be as he himself said a "*…great wickedness…*" so he rebuffed her.

Notice also that Joseph realized that sleeping with Potiphar's wife would be a sin not only against Potiphar but against God. This is reminiscent of the words of King David after the prophet Nathan called him out regarding his adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite.

> 4 *Against you, you only, have I sinned*
> *and done what is evil in your sight,*

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> ***so that you may be justified in your words***
> ***and blameless in your judgment.*** **Psalm 51:4 (ESV)**

There really is no such thing as a victimless sin. Our sins always harm someone – ourselves, other people, and above all, God Himself. David and Joseph recognized and acknowledged this. If we consider the consequences of our sins carefully, we can't help but be humbled, awestruck, and intensely thankful for Jesus' sacrifice of His own life on the cross, taking God's justifiable condemnation due *us* upon Himself in our place. As Paul said in his letter to the Romans…

> ***6For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.***
> ***7For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a***
> ***good person one would dare even to die— 8but God shows his love for us in***
> ***that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. 9Since, therefore, we***
> ***have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him***
> ***from the wrath of God.*** **Romans 5:6-9 (ESV)**

Although Joseph and David lived centuries before Jesus was born, they nevertheless realized the seriousness of our sins against God and our need for rescue out of death in our sins by God's infinite mercy.

> ***11But one day, when he went into the house to do his work and none of the***
> ***men of the house was there in the house, 12she caught him by his garment,***
> ***saying, "Lie with me." But he left his garment in her hand and fled and got***
> ***out of the house.*** **Genesis 39:11-12 (ESV)**

We modern Christians often say to one another something like, "God will never give you anything you can't handle." This is a misquote and misapplication of a well-known Bible verse from the Apostle Paul.

> ***13No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is***
> ***faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with***
> ***the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be***
> ***able to endure it.*** **1 Corinthians 10:13 (ESV)**

Most often in quoting (misquoting) this verse we ignore its scriptural context to imply it means something it doesn't. The context is clearly about temptations to sin, not general trials and hardships. Nor is the way of escape God provides out of temptation always easy or pleasant. In Joseph's case, the escape from the temptation to sleep with Potiphar's wife led to a marked and long-lasting worsening of Joseph's living situation in Egypt.

> ***13And as soon as she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had***
> ***fled out of the house, 14she called to the men of her household and said to***
> ***them, "See, he has brought among us a Hebrew*** **[עִבְרִי ʿiḇrî – one from beyond]** ***to***
> ***laugh at us. He came in to me to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud***
> ***voice. 15And as soon as he heard that I lifted up my voice and cried out, he***
> ***left his garment beside me and fled and got out of the house." 16Then she***
> ***laid up his garment by her until his master came home, 17and she told him***
> ***the same story, saying, "The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought***
> ***among us, came in to me to laugh at me. 18But as soon as I lifted up my***

> ***voice and cried, he left his garment beside me and fled out of the house."***
> **Genesis 39:13-18 (ESV)**

The English playwright William Congreve famously wrote, "*Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned, nor Hell a fury like a woman scorned*." But Potiphar's wife wasn't just disappointed and angered by Joseph repulsing her amorous advances. No doubt she also feared that Joseph would tell his master Potiphar about his wife's attempted infidelity. Realizing that often the first report about some incident or situation is more likely to be believed than later protestations to the contrary, she decided to put her lies about Joseph on the street before Joseph had a chance to tell anyone his own side of the story. Of course, she also had seemingly corroborating evidence on her side in the form of Joseph's garment that she had snatched from him.

False accusations like those leveled by Potiphar's wife against Joseph are one of our great enemy's most effective tools. Sometimes when we resist temptation and act with righteousness in obedience to the LORD, the adversary will use others – even those we might once have deemed our friends – to bring false accusations against us which may not even be related to the sin from which God has allowed us to escape. In those cases, it is tempting for us to simply surrender thinking, "What's the point of struggling against temptation when my old friends are going to lie about me anyway, and others are going to believe the lies they tell.

Jesus Himself was lied about and gave us the model for how we should respond to false accusation in His trial before Pontius Pilate.

> ***12 But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he gave no answer. 13 Then Pilate said to him, "Do you not hear how many things they testify against you?" 14 But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.*** **Matthew 27:12-14 (ESV)**

In this and other aspects of his life, Joseph modeled Jesus. As far as we know, Joseph made no response at all to the accusations Potiphar's wife brought against him – not even denying them to Potiphar. Joseph may have simply resigned himself (as Jesus did) to the inevitable. Thank God that today thousands of years later, we have the reassuring words of Jesus to rely upon when we are falsely accused.

> ***11 "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*** **Matthew 5:11-12 (ESV)**

ASIDE – Here in Genesis 39:14 we find the second instance in God's Word of the Hebrew word for Hebrew, **עִבְרִי ʿibrî**, meaning "one from beyond." The first instance of this word was in Genesis 14:13 referring to Abraham who was dwelling at that time by the oaks of Mamre the Amorite near Hebron. Abraham (Abram) had come to Canaan from Ur of the Chaldeans beyond the Jordan. Joseph came to Egypt from Canaan beyond the Nile.

Joseph in Prison

> ***19 As soon as his master heard the words that his wife spoke to him, "This is the way your servant treated me," his anger was kindled. 20 And Joseph's master took him and put him into the prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined, and he was there in prison.*** **Genesis 39:19-20 (ESV)**

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We can safely infer from these verses that Potiphar actually believed the lies his wife told about Joseph. Otherwise, if Potiphar was simply doing what he had to do to keep up the appearance of supporting and protecting his wife, it seems he would not have been angry with Joseph but put him in jail only grudgingly because his wife had left him no choice. Regardless of what Potiphar's true motivations may have been, he clearly forgot the way God had blessed his household because of Joseph. By assuming his wife's accusations against Joseph were true, Potiphar's actions reinforce the idea that whoever gets their story regarding a conflict broadcast first is most likely to be believed.

Our sense of right and justice rebels against the way Joseph was treated by Potiphar and his wife. Indeed, that same sense of right and justice should be outraged by the treatment of Jesus in His trials, torture, and crucifixion. But we need to remember that God used Joseph's tribulations to rescue Israel out of the coming regional famine, just as God uses Jesus' suffering to rescue all humanity out of death in our sins.

> ***21 But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison. 22 And the keeper of the prison put Joseph in charge of all the prisoners who were in the prison. Whatever was done there, he was the one who did it. 23 The keeper of the prison paid no attention to anything that was in Joseph's charge, because the LORD was with him. And whatever he did, the LORD made it succeed.***
>
> **Genesis 39:21-23 (ESV)**

Like Potiphar, the keeper of the prison quickly recognized the favor of the LORD which Joseph enjoyed. Although Joseph's situation seemed to have gone from bad to worse, God was working strongly in Joseph's life – preparing him for the ministry that God was about to assign him. Rather than becoming disheartened at the seeming downturn in his situation, Joseph continued to serve God and those around him despite the circumstances in which he had found himself. In this, Joseph provides an encouraging example for us when we find ourselves in difficulties.

Remember Paul's encouragement for those who are in subservience.

> ***5 Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, 6 not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, 7 rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, 8 knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free.*** **Ephesians 6:5-8 (ESV)**

Joseph remained faithful to God and to the calling God had placed upon his life, without knowing or even seemingly wanting to know the reasons God had allowed him to be placed into bondage.

> ***40:1 Some time after this, the cupbearer of the king of Egypt and his baker committed an offense against their lord the king of Egypt. 2 And Pharaoh was angry with his two officers, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker, 3 and he put them in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, in the prison where Joseph was confined. 4 The captain of the guard appointed Joseph to be with them, and he attended them. They continued for some time in custody.*** **Genesis 40:1-4 (ESV)**

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We have no way to know exactly how long Joseph remained in prison before encountering Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker there. Suffice it to say that it was exactly the time needed to prepare Joseph for the ministry to which God eventually called him, and to bring about the coming famine out of which God would use Joseph to rescue his people, Israel.

The recurrence of the Hebrew **שַׂר הַטַּבָּחִים śar ṭabāḥim – captain of the guard** in Genesis 40:3 & 4 is intriguing. Recall that this same phrase was used to describe Josheph's first Egyptian master Potiphar. This begs the question of whether the keeper of the prison into which Joseph was thrown was none other than Potiphar himself.

The KJV and NKJV translate the Hebrew **מַשְׁקֶה mašqê** in Genesis 40:1 as "butler" rather than "cupbearer." The word can mean both, but most modern translations prefer to render it as "cupbearer" to reflect the specialized nature of this servant's duties. The cupbearer would be continually at the king's side at official functions to replenish the king's beverage (usually wine) whenever the king desired. In some instances, the cupbearer would also sample the beverage to ensure it was safe for the king to drink. Notice that Genesis 40:2 refers to the servants of Pharaoh imprisoned with Joseph as the "***chief***" cupholder and baker, implying that these men were in positions of significant responsibility as the heads of crews of bakers and cupbearers serving Pharaoh.

> ***5And one night they both dreamed—the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt, who were confined in the prison—each his own dream, and each dream with its own interpretation. 6When Joseph came to them in the morning, he saw that they were troubled. 7So he asked Pharaoh's officers who were with him in custody in his master's house, "Why are your faces downcast today?" 8They said to him, "We have had dreams, and there is no one to interpret them." And Joseph said to them, "Do not interpretations belong to God? Please tell them to me."*** **Genesis 40:5-8 (ESV)**

Joseph was immediately aware that the dreams of his fellow prisoners had troubled them. This in itself is a spiritual gift. Most of us can think of people in our lives who have been gifted by God with notable empathy and compassion. Although not as spectacular as some of the other gifts with which God might endow us, empathy and compassion are perhaps the most precious. On the night He was betrayed, Jesus gave His disciples a "***new***" commandment – that we love one another (John 13:34). Often, all that's needed for us to fulfill this command is for us to simply listen and sympathize with our loved ones' travails and to pray with them, even when there's nothing else we ourselves can do practically to relieve them.

Notice also that Joseph was quick to point out to the king's baker and cupbearer that the interpretation of dreams is the province of God. Although Joseph had clearly been blessed by God with the ability to interpret dreams, Joseph clearly understood that this ability was not his own, but a gift from God. Furthermore, Joseph was quick to point this out to his fellow prisoners. Similarly, the prophet Daniel personally acknowledged and declared to King Nebuchadnezzar that the interpretation of the king's dreams was by God's will and power (Daniel 2).

This humility in those who have been granted impressive talents like Joseph and Daniel is how we can discern whether the seeming wonders someone performs are genuine by the power of God's will and Spirit, or whether they are "lying wonders" – illusions manifested by our great adversary. If a person freely acknowledges that the ability to accomplish some wonderful feat like healing or prophecy comes from God and that they are only the instrument through whom God has performed the work, then that work is likely a true miracle of God. If on the other hand a person takes personal credit for it rather than giving thanks and praise to God, then very likely the seeming work of the Spirit is actually

a work of the evil one or of a human pretender. We would do well to remember the warning Jesus gave speaking to His disciples about the signs of the coming of the end.

> ***24For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect.*** **Matthew 24:24 (ESV)**

> ***9So the chief cupbearer told his dream to Joseph and said to him, "In my dream there was a vine before me, 10and on the vine there were three branches. As soon as it budded, its blossoms shot forth, and the clusters ripened into grapes. 11Pharaoh's cup was in my hand, and I took the grapes and pressed them into Pharaoh's cup and placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand." 12Then Joseph said to him, "This is its interpretation: the three branches are three days. 13In three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your office, and you shall place Pharaoh's cup in his hand as formerly, when you were his cupbearer. 14Only remember me, when it is well with you, and please do me the kindness to mention me to Pharaoh, and so get me out of this house. 15For I was indeed stolen out of the land of the Hebrews, and here also I have done nothing that they should put me into the pit."*** **Genesis 40:9-15 (ESV)**

As we look at the dreams of Joseph's fellow prisoners and their interpretation, we should remember that dreams are most often nothing to worry over. Although God occasionally uses dreams to communicate with His children as he did with Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker, these events are far from usual. Certainly, we shouldn't just ignore our dreams. If we can remember them after we awake, we should consider our dreams to discern their meaning and what God may be saying to us through them, but we shouldn't dwell on them. On the rare occasion when God speaks to us through our dreams, He will be faithful to make their meaning clear as He did for Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker. Most importantly, we must keep in mind that the interpretation of our dreams will *never* conflict with God's Word which He has provided as His primary means of speaking to us.

The cupbearers dream and its interpretation speak for themselves. Joseph's plea for the cupbearer to remember him and mention his plight to Pharaoh after being freed is heartbreaking. We sinful people will always let each other down – often with tragic consequences. Our loving and nurturing God is the only One who will never forsake us. We can and must trust Him to always fulfill His promises and patiently await the unfolding of His will for us. God was doing a work in Joseph's life through his imprisonment and his interactions with his fellow prisoners, just as He is doing in our own lives and the lives of everyone around us each day that we live. Furthermore, God's will for us is always perfect and good, even and especially when our present circumstances appear otherwise.

Before we move on, notice that Joseph didn't mention his brothers' complicity in his slavery and imprisonment. I find this intriguing, and it is a good example for us to follow. Perhaps Joseph already realized that God had used his brothers' treachery for some greater purpose which Joseph himself did not yet fathom. But even if not, Joseph knew that no good purpose could be served by mentioning what his brothers had done to the cupbearer and baker. We would do well to remember Joseph's example when our brothers and sisters treat us badly. We need to always remember that those around us are fallen sinners just like us whose only hope is Christ and the indwelling of His Spirit in our hearts. Most importantly, when we are reminded of the wrongs others have done to us, we should use that reminder to consider whatever wrongs we ourselves may have done to those around us and then act to make amends for them.

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> ***16When the chief baker saw that the interpretation was favorable, he said to Joseph, "I also had a dream: there were three cake baskets on my head, 17and in the uppermost basket there were all sorts of baked food for Pharaoh, but the birds were eating it out of the basket on my head." 18And Joseph answered and said, "This is its interpretation: the three baskets are three days. 19In three days Pharaoh will lift up your head—from you!—and hang you on a tree. And the birds will eat the flesh from you."*** **Genesis 40:16-19 (ESV)**

Encouraged by the favorable interpretation of the cupbearer's dream, the baker hoped for the same. He must have been devastated when Joseph foretold what would happen to him. We too are disappointed and perhaps even a little upset with God on the baker's behalf. But there's an important lesson for us in the baker's story.

Joseph didn't gloss over the interpretation of the baker's dream. Instead, he frankly gave the baker the bad news. We must do the same in our Gospel witness to those around us. Certainly, the promise of eternal life for those who simply believe that God has raised Jesus from the dead and profess to those around us our determination to follow and obey Jesus as Lord over our lives is wonderful news that must be shouted from the housetops with joy. In fact, the very word Gospel means glad tidings. But by the same token, we must never forget that this joyous salvation was purchased for us at the heavy price of Jesus' own life, and that our own sins made Jesus' sacrifice on the cross necessary for our salvation. When we proclaim the glad tidings, we must also be honest about the reason Jesus died for us. Belief in the good news and repentance for our sins which drove Jesus to the cross go hand in hand as the keys to our redemption.

> ***20On the third day, which was Pharaoh's birthday, he made a feast for all his servants and lifted up the head of the chief cupbearer and the head of the chief baker among his servants. 21He restored the chief cupbearer to his position, and he placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand. 22But he hanged the chief baker, as Joseph had interpreted to them. 23Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him.*** **Genesis 40:20-23 (ESV)**

It is an intriguing study to look at all the places we find the phrase "***the third day***" in God's Word. Most famously, of course, was Jesus' foretelling of His own resurrection to His disciples as they approached Jerusalem with Him for the last time.

> ***17And as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside, and on the way he said to them, 18"See, we are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death 19and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day."*** **Matthew 20:17-19 (ESV)**

The fact that the stories of the baker and cupbearer unfolded just as Joseph had said in his interpretation of their dreams is a reminder of how we can discern true prophecies from false ones. Firstly, no true prophecy will ever contradict God's revealed Word. More practically though, if a prophecy comes to pass like Joseph's interpretation of his fellow prisoners' dreams, then the prophecy was obviously not false. Of course, many prophecies remain to be fulfilled, but we can still take the "track record" of the associated prophets as a good indication that their prophecies are true and will eventually be fulfilled.

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Looking Ahead

Despite Joseph's plea for the cupbearer to remember him and mention him to Pharaoh, the man forgot all about Joseph, and that's the way we'll leave him for now. Still, we can assume that Joseph continued in faith, knowing in the depth of his being that God was working all the suffering in his life for a greater good. Next time, we'll see that God eventually rescued Joseph out of prison and raised him up into a high position in the Egyptian government by using him to interpret Pharaoh's dreams.