



The Sermon

Phil Johnson

Genesis 40

September 25, 2022

"With Joseph in Prison"

TRANSCRIPT

We're going to look at Genesis chapter 40; that's where you are in your study. This was assigned to me, and I've never preached on the passage, so I had to do a lot of study to sort of catch up. And a lot of what I'm going to cover at the very beginning here might be review to some of you, because you've been following through these chapters; but a lot of it was still pretty fresh to me. And there are a lot of themes and threads that tie the story of Joseph together that go back a couple of chapters, so I just want to review a little bit and then we'll get into chapter 40.

You're working your way through, I guess, the latter part of Genesis now. When you left Joseph at the end of chapter 39, he had been put in prison, because Potiphar's evil, lecherous wife falsely accused him when her attempts to seduce him failed. And that is just the latest in a series of catastrophes that happened to Joseph, all without any culpability on his part. And so far he's been the victim of a sinister plot by his own brothers, first to kill him out of sheer jealousy, and ultimately to sell him into slavery.

By the way, the speed and the ease with which those brothers hatched this plot against him I think highlights for us the evil intensity of their hatred that they had for their brother; it's really quite astonishing. You look at the narrative you'll notice that this cruel scheme that ended Joseph's childhood, and nearly ended his life, was born in a moment when the older brothers were pasturing their father's flock in a remote village. Jacob sent Joseph to check on their welfare, and Genesis 37:18 says, "They saw him from a distance," – they see him coming – "and before he came close to them

5622 Dyer Street, Suite 200 | Dallas, Texas | 75206 | 214.972.9679 | TrinityBiblechurchofdallas.com

they plotted against him to put him to death." So he's within view when it occurs to them to do this; and from the time they saw him coming, before he even got close to them, Scripture says, they had decided amongst themselves that they were going to kill him. Verse 20, chapter 37, "Let us kill him and cast him into one of the pits, and we will say a wild beast devoured him." And then they carried out that plot, verse 24, "They took him and cast him into the pit. Now the pit was empty without any water in it." And I thought, "I used to read that and think of a hole in the ground." It's not merely a hole in the ground; he's left in this empty pit in the desert to die of exposure and dehydration. And I want you to keep this word "pit" in mind, because it's going to come up again in our chapter.

But notice how the brothers said, "one of the pits," as if the desert is full of these things. And the truth is, it was. These were common in the desert. The Hebrew word that's translated "pit" there actually signifies a "well" or a "cistern." It would be either, they are not the same thing, by the way. This kind of pit was normally a place where water was stored for people in the desert to use; or, if it was a well, it was a place where water could be drawn up from some deep down water table. And in this case we're told the pit was empty without any water in it.

So this was a cistern that was dry. A well in that region would be too deep, frankly, to survive if you got thrown into it, because the water table was pretty low right there. And if they had tossed him down into a well, he might never have been able to get out. But a cistern would also be basically an underground tank, a storage tank, that had a deep narrow hole, entry hole. And so this would be a place of utter despair if you got thrown in or if you fell in. You really had very little hope to survive. This is Joseph's first undeserved life-threatening catastrophe.

But then the brothers have second thoughts, and motivated, you'd like to think by their consciences; and Reuben had a conscience. But the truth is the other brothers I think are motivated more by greed than their tender consciences, because they decide, "We could actually sell him and make a profit selling him as a slave." And so after dumping Joseph in that pit, they went actually and sat down together for a meal; and from where they were eating, while they're having fellowship after, as far as they knew, killing their brother, they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead. These are international merchants and slave traders, with camels bearing aromatic gum and balm and myrrh going to Egypt. And so some of the brothers pulled Joseph up out of the pit and sell him to these slave traders, which is both for Joseph a blessing; it saves his life. But it's also another

catastrophe, because while it means he won't die a slow death in that empty cistern, it also means that he is now captive to a band of slave traders and headed for Egypt. As one commentator I read says, "being lifted up out of the pit only to pass into slavery." And this is the last time these brothers ever expect that they're going to see Joseph.

This will be the story of Joseph's life for 13 years; and along the way, as you're reading, as you're studying through this, you've probably noticed he gets these little hints of hope and encouragement, always only to be disappointed again; at least that's what it seems like from the human perspective. And the journey from that pit to Egypt could not have been a comfortable one. He was undoubtedly bound the whole way. He was most likely forced to walk, and pulled along by a slave trader's rope. I think if Joseph were someone prone easily to discouragement, if he was this sort of cup half empty kind of guy rather than the optimist he was, he might have died of melancholy before he ever made it out of Sinai.

But at the end of chapter 37 we're told, "The Midianites sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, Pharaoh's officer, the captain of the bodyguard." And, again, this is both a blessing and a new catastrophe. It's a blessing, because Potiphar is a high-ranking official. So Joseph is going to be a slave in a palace, not just a menial laborer out under the sun all the time, but he's the assistant to the captain of Pharaoh's bodyguard.

But still, this is a catastrophic turn of events, because now Joseph is enslaved to a man who is involved in one of the most sinister pagan cults ever to have dominance over any national world power, political power. Egypt was corrupt and under the bondage of this whole system of sun worship. The name "Potiphar" actually means "he who is devoted to the sun."

Potiphar was a pagan sun-worshiper; and, in fact, his name and his high position suggests that he held great influence among the sun-worshipers. And Joseph is his slave, he's a captive within this pagan overlord's household, with no obvious prospect of hope or redemption, no way for him to escape. He has no friends, he has no close relatives in Egypt. When he first arrives, surely he doesn't even know the language. He has little experience in anything he is about to be made to do, he's only a teenager still. His heart was, I think, surely full of sorrow at being not only cut off from his own loved ones, but hated so much by his own brothers. This is a recipe for despair. This is enough despair to kill any normal man.

But Joseph presses on faithfully. Genesis 39:2 tells us, "He became a successful man." He prospered and he gained the respect of his master in an amazing way, chapter 39, verse 4, "Joseph found favor in Potiphar's sight and attended on him; and Potiphar appointed him overseer of his house, and all that he owned he gave into his hands." Here's what I want you to bear in mind: it's that this is the dominant theme of Joseph's life. This happens to him everywhere he goes: he impresses people, and they elevate him. Despite all of the setbacks he suffered, Joseph prospers on some level no matter where he lands. We'll see that again in chapter 40. But nevertheless, you have these little hints of hope and prosperity that inevitably give way to more catastrophe; and that, as you know, is what happened after Joseph gained the respect and the good will of Potiphar.

Potiphar had a wife with the heart of a lust-filled trollop, and she tried to entice Joseph into an adulterous affair; and when her attempts to corrupt him utterly failed, she got angry and falsely accused him of rape. And so at the end of chapter 39, verse 20, we are told, "Joseph's master" – that's Potiphar – "took him and put him into the jail." So here's another setback, another catastrophe. All Joseph's favor with Potiphar instantly evaporates. He is put in what is undoubtedly the smallest, most secure, most isolated dankest dungeon in all of Egypt, because as Scripture says, this is the place where the king's prisoners were confined; and he was there in the jail.

And yet, before chapter 39 even closes, you have another hint of hope and encouragement. Remember what we said, this is the theme of Joseph's life: he always prospers on some level no matter where he lands. And in this case, he impresses the jailer with the same skill and integrity and trustworthiness that had originally impressed Potiphar. And so now, Joseph makes a favorable impression on this guy, who's probably Potiphar's next in command, the guy in charge of the jail. In verse 22 of chapter 39, Moses tells us, "The chief jailer gave into the hand of Joseph all the prisoners who were in the jail, so that whatever was done there, he was the one who did it."

Now you know that part of the story, you all have studied it. I only rehearsed it because I had to read it in order to get up to speed with you. But let's pick it up at the start of chapter 40, and I'll read through the text a few verses at a time rather than all at once, and let's trace the narrative; and then I have some lessons I want to draw from this chapter and point out to you. So we'll go through it, Genesis 40. It starts with these two high-ranking prisoners being thrown into the same dungeon where Joseph is being held.

Verse 1: "Now it happened that after these things the cup-bearer and the baker for the king of Egypt offended their lord the king of Egypt. And Pharaoh was furious with his two officials, the chief cup-bearer and the chief baker, so he put them in confinement in the house of the captain of the bodyguard in the jail in the same place where Joseph was imprisoned. And the captain of the bodyguard appointed Joseph as overseer over them, and Joseph attended to them, and they were in confinement for some time."

Now if you read the King James Version it refers to the cup-bearer as Pharaoh's butler, and so a lot of commentaries still refer to him as a butler. But the Hebrew word describing this guy's office actually refers to drink or to a drinking vessel; and so while this guy probably did fulfill some of the duties that a butler would have, his chief responsibility was to guard and to deliver the cup to the king when he drank just to ensure that no one ever had the opportunity to poison him or otherwise tamper with his wine. This guy was in charge of the wine cellar as well. He would maintain and verify the quality of everything that was in there. So this was a weighty responsibility, and it was given only to the most trustworthy person. This is a position of highest honor reserved for someone with the utmost integrity. And the cup-bearer's duties would, no doubt, put him in close contact with other workers in Pharaoh's kitchen; and in this case it's the baker.

Now notice, both of these men are at the very top of their respective crafts. They're called, verse 2, the chief cup-bearer and the chief baker. No one in the entire realm of Egypt who worked in that vocation had a higher rank than these two guys. And the role of chief baker actually had huge significance. This was not a guy who was a kitchen worker who just stayed in the back room and had no personal contact with Pharaoh, his role was actually a very important one, and his duties far transcended the preparation of bread for meals, because baked goods and bread had a powerful religious significance in ancient Egypt.

You know, they've dug up a lot of ancient Egyptian tombs and they're always filled with baked goods. And fresh baked things would be regularly taken into the tombs of high-ranking but dead Egyptians. In fact, let me quote to you from a book on ancient Egyptian funeral protocol. Don't ask me why I read this. But I found this, and it says, "To ensure the happiness of the deceased there was a constant flow of offerings into the temples and mortuary priesthods: pastries, cakes, and fruit breads." One list of these temple offerings includes over 20 kinds of baked goods, and the Harris Papyrus gives us at least 30.

So this chief baker's duties had profound religious overtones in the Egyptian style of paganism. He is like the high priest of the bakery. And somehow these two high-ranking officials had fallen under Pharaoh's displeasure. The text tells us, "They offended their lord, the king of Egypt, and he was furious." Now it's unlikely that anything, whatever that it was they did – and Scripture doesn't tell us – whatever it was, unlikely that it was anything trivial. The Hebrew term for "offended" there has the connotation of guilt and sin. It's a word that speaks of sin. And so what they did, whatever it was, was almost certainly a deliberate transgression of some kind, and most likely a very serious one, because as we're going to see later in this chapter, the baker pays for it as if it's a capital crime. He loses his life for it.

Now perhaps there was evidence somewhere of an attempt or possibly a conspiracy to poison the wine of Pharaoh, and these two became the chief suspects. It was most likely something on that level, something very serious, because notice, they're cast in Pharaoh's private dungeon, the dungeon he keeps for people who have personally offended him; and he's there with Joseph, who is an accused and convicted, although falsely convicted, rapist of a high official's wife, so he would have been considered a very serious criminal as well. Whatever this prison was, it is certainly no place of ease and recreation. Don't get that impression from it. This is not the Egyptian equivalent of those hotel-style European penitentiaries that you see for white-collar criminals. This is still just a dank dungeon. And the prisoners are kept in chains and manacles, and that includes Joseph.

When you read that he was given charge over other prisoners and all, don't imagine that they relieved him of his chains. He's now something of a trustee in the prison, but he's still in chains; we know that for two reasons. One, the last word there in verse 3, "imprisoned" in our translation, that's actually a Hebrew word that means "bound," and specifically it speaks of "being bound with chords or chains." And then Psalm 105 mentions Joseph and talks about his time in this prison, and it says in Psalm 105:18, "They afflicted his feet with fetters, he himself was laid in irons."

So his feet are manacled together. This is a dismal existence for all of these men, including Joseph. Even though he has already gained the trust of the jailer and been given a measure of responsibility, he hasn't been given much freedom. And he's now given a new duty, not by the jailer, but notice, verse 4, by the captain of the bodyguard. If you're paying attention you know who that is; that's Potiphar. I have always suspected that Potiphar, who surely

knew better than anybody what his wife's character was really like, he probably believed in Joseph's innocence, or at the very least, doubted his guilt, so that he here demonstrates his trust in Joseph's integrity once more, and puts these two men in his care. And these two disgraced officials are now put in his care.

And his task, by the way, is not to guard them, but to serve them. He brings them their meals, and runs errands on behalf of the jailer whenever these two fallen bigwigs have any need. And as it says in chapter 39, verse 22, "Whatever was done there, Joseph was the one to do it," which does not suggest that he was actually the one in charge. He wasn't, he was the gopher for the guy who was in charge. He's a servant, he's a slave still. And this is a position of trust, and some small measure, perhaps, of privilege. He's the trustee under the jailer's oversight, but he is still a prisoner.

Verse 5, "Then the cup-bearer and the baker for the king of Egypt, who were confined in jail, both had a dream the same night, each man with his own dream, and each dream with its own interpretation. Now Joseph came to them in the morning and saw them, and behold, they were dejected. So he asked Pharaoh's officials who were with him in confinement at his master's house, saying, 'Why are your faces so sad today?' Then they said to him, 'We've had a dream, and there is no one to interpret it.'"

Now, here you get a glimpse of why Joseph always had a good reputation and gained people's trusts so quickly. Notice, he sees, or somehow senses, that the baker and the cup-bearer are, in a particular way, out of sorts on this morning, which tells us Joseph was observant and attentive and diligent in his duties, and eager to be helpful, and unusually optimistic. And people like that always gain the trust of others. But you have to smile, don't you, when he says, "Why are your faces so sad today?" because, after all, these two guys had incurred the displeasure of the most powerful man in the world.

They had lost their livelihoods and their reputations already. They were in the closest thing to solitary confinement without literally being locked up alone. They were cut off from all their friends and loved ones, everybody that they ever knew or had as moral support. And as subsequent events suggest, they had been accused of some high crime that carried the possibility of execution, and he says, "Why are your faces so sad today?" which tells us, I think, that Joseph – this is something about his personality. He's an inveterate optimist, he's definitely the glass half full

kind of guy. And it turns out that each of these men had been visited in the night with a dream so vivid that they were convinced it had significance.

Now, they're Pagans living in a pagan culture, and it seems certain that this notion that their dreams meant something starts with a superstitious belief on their part, because it is a matter of record that Egyptians saw great significance in the mystical meanings that they supposed were embedded in their dreams. In fact, in Egypt and, truthfully, all the nations that surrounded Israel, the interpretation of dreams was such an important part of all of those pagan belief systems, that all the surrounding cultures had people, soothsayers, who did nothing but interpret dreams. It was a superstition comparable to what we see today in astrology and palm reading, or the people who grab the newspaper every morning and look at the horoscope; it's like that.

And in all of Scripture – notice this, because it's important. This chapter is not giving us a stamp of OK on the interpretation of dreams, because in all of Scripture there are only two places where a godly believer interprets a dream for someone else. Joseph is about to do it here in our chapter, Daniel does it in the book of Daniel, but no other Israelite ever served righteously as an interpreter of dreams. And it's significant, I think, that both Daniel and Joseph, when they did this, were exiled in foreign lands that were dominated by pagan superstitions, and they were called upon to interpret dreams for pagan people. And both of them, Joseph and Daniel in the providence of God, ended up serving in high positions under pagan rulers, so that God in His providence used this pagan superstition to convey truth and accomplish His purposes; and thereby, ultimately, it's going to elevate Joseph. And it elevated Daniel as well when he did it.

But dreams are not the customary way that God communicates to His people. There are, of course, a handful of incidents in Scripture where God does communicate truth directly to people by dreams, but the distinctive of every one of those revelatory dreams from God to His people is that they don't require interpretation. When God communicates to His people, He speaks with clarity, even if He speaks through a dream – which, again, is extremely rare. Joseph as a young man had been a recipient of two dreams, and both of them had an absolutely clear meaning, so clear that when he told those dreams to his brothers, that was a major factor in helping to stir up the resentment and jealousy of those brothers in the first place. They understood immediately what those dreams meant.

This idea of sharing his dreams with his brothers, by the way, this is an anomaly in Joseph's character. At that point as a young man, he seemed almost oblivious to the jealousy that his dreams might stir up in his brothers; he just tells them casually as if this should be good news to them. But normally, and after that, Joseph always displays this unusual sensitivity and empathy for the feelings of others; and he does it here. He notices that these two dignitaries imprisoned with him are dejected and downcast and distraught.

Again, these were men who had already lost lucrative positions of favor and influence with Pharaoh. They were exiled to this dungeon that was reserved for people who had personally offended Pharaoh. It seems unlikely that Joseph had ever seen these guys in a good mood, right? I mean, you wouldn't imagine that they'd be in this dungeon smiling and jovial. But on this day somehow he notices something in their countenance that signals an even deeper level of frustration and worry. Consternation, sadness, alarm, whatever it was, he kindly asked them, "What's wrong?" Their answer, "We've had a dream," they told him, meaning each one of them had had a dream, different dreams, vivid dreams, each dream with its distinctive application to the person who dreamed it. So the cupbearer's dream is about giving Pharaoh wine, the bread-maker's dream is about carrying baskets of baked goods. And notice, it seems these two guys had already talked about this between themselves, because they were aware that they had both had this experience. The fact that both of them had such vivid dreams, apparently meaningful dreams on the same night, somehow this seemed to intensify their distress.

And it is notable that all the dreams in the story of Joseph come in pairs, always two of them. Joseph as a youth had double dreams. Genesis 37:5, "Joseph had a dream." Four verses later, "He had still another dream." And again, although Joseph's dreams are loaded with symbols, and they're clearly symbolic, they don't require any interpretation; they're obvious what they mean. Both dreams signified the same thing, namely that Joseph would one day rule, and his brothers would bow to him.

And then you have these two dreams on the same night by the cup-bearer and the baker. And then finally, to jump ahead a bit, Pharaoh is going to have a pair of dreams in chapter 41. Genesis 41:1, "Pharaoh had a dream." Then again, verse 5, "He again fell asleep and dreamed a second time." So they come in pairs, which is interesting. And here in chapter 40, the fact that two men both had memorable and clearly symbolic dreams on the same night with ominous overtones, they wanted their dreams interpreted.

So we pick up the narrative at verse 9, and I'll read a much longer section this time. Actually, I'll probably interrupt myself and comment it. But I intend to read straight through a few verses here. Here both dreams and their interpretations, verse 9: "So the chief cup-bearer recounted his dream to Joseph and said to him, 'In my dream, behold, there was a vine in front of me, and on the vine were three branches, and as it was budding its blossoms came out and its clusters produced ripe grapes.' - So what he's describing is he's seeing this like a stop action movie that all happens very fast: the branches bud and then bloom and then produce grapes. And then immediately, verse 11 - 'Pharaoh's cup was in my hand, so I took the grapes and squeezed them into Pharaoh's cup, and I put the cup into Pharaoh's hand.' Then Joseph said to him, "This is the interpretation of it. The three branches are three days. Within three more days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your office, and you will put Pharaoh's cup into his hand according to your former custom when you were his cup-bearer.'" So it's good news actually, and the guy breathes a sigh of relief hoping that Joseph is correct.

Notice Joseph's request. He's so certain it's correct, not because he figured out some mystery in this dream, but there's only one way to read this, and that it is that this is a prophetic message from God through Joseph. God gave this truth to Joseph. "And so Joseph says," - verse 14 - 'Only remember me when it goes well with you, and please show me lovingkindness by remembering me to Pharaoh and getting me out of this house. For I was, in fact, stolen from the land of the Hebrews; and even here I have done nothing that they should have put me into the pit.'" Now, two things to notice here. First, that word "pit," that's the same word that was used in chapter 37 to describe the empty desert cistern that Joseph's brothers threw him into. So it gives you an idea of the feeling of what it was like in that dungeon. This was a pit, it was a place where you die slowly.

And, second, notice - and I hope this jumped out at you as well - he says he was stolen from his homeland. Now, strictly speaking, you could make an argument that that is true; his brothers kidnapped him, so they stole him. But they actually sold him into slavery into Egypt. So why does he tell these fallen dignitaries that he was stolen? I think there's only one explanation for this, and it's that even here in this dank pit of a prison, with every reason for Joseph to be sitting there seething with resentment and wishing for revenge against his brothers, he's not doing that. He wants to be reconciled to them. And so he describes what happened to him in a way that

very clearly is designed to preserve the dignity of his brothers. He doesn't implicate them at all as he describes what happened to him.

Verse 16 – and by the way, that tells you what Joseph is thinking early on. You're going to see it come out later, but don't think that that's a new feeling in the later chapters when Joseph is reconciled with his brothers. That's what he wanted all along. Verse 16, "And the chief baker saw that he had interpreted faithfully, so he said to Joseph, 'I also saw in my dream; and behold, there were three baskets of white bread on my head. And in the top basket there were some of all sorts of baked food for Pharaoh, and the birds were eating them out of the basket on my head.' Then Joseph answered and said, 'This is its interpretation. The three baskets are three days. Within three more days Pharaoh will lift up your head off of you and will hang you on a tree, and the birds will eat your flesh off of you.'"

So, the cup-bearer will be set free and restored to his position, and the baker will be hanged. I like that he uses the same expression to describe both men's future. "Pharaoh will lift up your head." He says that to both of them. For the cup-bearer, this means elevation to his former position; for the baker, it means elevation by a rope. Maybe Pharaoh had investigated and found out that in whatever this attempt to kill him or whatever it was, it was the baker alone who was guilty, and the cup-bearer wasn't part of the conspiracy. Or, maybe Pharaoh is just being arbitrary here. Either way, what's important to Scripture is not describing what was going on with these two guys and Pharaoh, what Scripture wants us to see is that Joseph's prophecy came to pass exactly as he predicted.

Verse 20, "Thus it happened on the third day, which was Pharaoh's birthday, that he made a feast for all his servants. And he lifted up the head of the chief cup-bearer and the head of the chief baker among his servants," – it describes it the same way: lifted up their heads – "and he restored the chief cup-bearer to his office, and he put the cup into Pharaoh's hand, but he hanged the chief baker, just as Joseph had interpreted to them."

So Joseph establishes himself not only as a trustworthy man, but also as a blessed man with unique gifts and with skills that any Egyptian would covet. And it intrigues me that the Pharaoh does what he does here. And first of all, he celebrates his birthday with a great feast. Some of us do that. But the custom there was for him to give the gifts, to grant clemency and give gifts rather than receiving gifts from others. And in this case, he showed clemency and compassion to the cup-bearer; but he also needed to

demonstrate his power, and so he does that by ordering the immediate execution of the baker.

And yet again, as so often we see in Joseph's life up to this point, a ray of hope turns to disappointment, and the chapter ends with this single verse statement that seems to me to deflate all of the happiness out of this chapter. Verse 23, "Yet the chief cup-bearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him." Now whether he forgot him purposely and malignantly or just negligently, it's not clear. But Joseph is left alone again. His progress is halted. Every prospect of release from his predicament is gone. He seems to be literally in a worse place than he was when this chapter started, except that we know, don't we, that this long narrative, the whole story of Joseph's life, is going to have a happy, tear-inducing ending. It'll make you cry.

And you know what? I think even Joseph himself knew that, that was coming. He anticipated it, he expected it. He still hoped for and waited for it despite the string of setbacks that he had endured, because he had a promise from God that came to him in the form of those two dramatic, revelatory dreams, and he believed that He who promised is faithful. And although we know Joseph must have been disappointed by all those setbacks, notice in the story of his life there is never one hint, never one word of bitterness or depression or resentment toward God in anything Joseph ever says.

And in fact, remember what I said earlier: despite all of the setbacks he suffered, Joseph prospers on some level, no matter where he lands. That's the motif that runs through his entire life. And you think about that. How can anyone so abused, as he was, remained so confident and positive? And I see in our text three answers to that question, three reasons Joseph always succeeded despite the setbacks he suffered. These are the lessons I want us to take away from this chapter.

Three reasons for Joseph's positive attitude and his tenacity, even in the midst of these relentless trials. Reason Number One: "He had Yahweh's presence. God was with Him." Scripture says that repeatedly. This is truly Reason Number One. I mean, this is the one reason. If you boiled it all down, in all the factors that explain Joseph's prosperity in the midst of suffering, here's the reason: "God was with him."

That's a theme actually in Scripture almost every time Joseph is mentioned. It starts almost as soon – well, exactly as soon as Joseph arrives in Egypt. Genesis 39:2, "Yahweh was with Joseph, so he became a successful man." Three verses later, "Yahweh blessed the Egyptian's house on account of Joseph; thus the blessing of Yahweh was upon all that he owned in the house and in the field." And then seventeen verses later, when Joseph is cast into the dungeon, Genesis 39:21, "But Yahweh was with Joseph" – even in the dungeon – "and extended lovingkindness to him, and gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer. Then two verses after that, "Yahweh was with him, and whatever he did Yahweh made to succeed."

And then even in the New Testament, I mean this ties all of Scripture together. You go into the New Testament, you remember where Stephen is stoned, and just before he is stoned to death and becomes the first martyr, Stephen gives this summary of Old Testament history, and when he gets to the part about Joseph this is what he says, Acts 7:9-10, "Yet God was with Joseph, and rescued him from all his afflictions, and granted him favor and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh."

Spurgeon said that is the whole biography of Joseph sketched by inspiration from the Holy Spirit and put into a single sentence of just three words: "God was" – or is it four words? – "God was with him." I said three words; I wrote it in my notes as three words. That's four words: "God was with him." And Spurgeon noted the irony of Joseph's early life alongside Genesis 39:2 that "Yahweh was with Joseph, so he became a successful man." Spurgeon commented on that and said, "Externally it did not always appear that God was with him, for he did not always seem to be a prosperous man. But when you come to look into the inmost soul of this servant of God, you see his true likeness," Spurgeon said. "He lived in communion with the Most High, and God blessed him. The LORD was with Joseph, and he was a prosperous man."

Now that, of course is, the primary factor that made Joseph who he was . He was not prosperous mainly because of some innate skill or charm; he had those things, he was obviously a capable man. But when you look at the twists and turns in his life you have to realize that some greater mind is moving this narrative forward. I'll say more on that in a moment. But it's a fact of truth and Scripture that no one ever prospers without the Lord's say so and blessing. You could never accomplish anything that's truly good without the Lord's enablement and sanctions. Scripture says that in so many words in Psalm 127:1, "Unless Yahweh builds the house, they labor in vain

who build it. Unless Yahweh watches the city, the watchman keeps awake in vain."

And in Joseph's case, you see also that the polar opposite is true as well. Because God was with him, nothing his adversaries ever did to him could really threaten to undermine his faith, or overthrow his optimism, or ruin his hope, or even erase his love for his brothers. All of that remained intact, no matter what happened to Joseph. And that's why I think of all of the promises in Scripture that we're given none is more precious than the promise of God's presence; and that's a promise given to us repeatedly in many ways. Every believer has this promise. If you're a believer, this is your promise. The promise is embedded in the very name of our Savior, Immanuel, which translated means "God with us."

Jesus' parting words in Matthew 28:20 were, "Behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Hebrews 13:5, "He Himself has said, 'I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you.'" Psalm 46:7, "Yahweh of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our stronghold." And, in fact, this was the promise God made to Joshua right after the death of Moses. The one thing that held all of that together, Joshua 1:5, He says, "Just as I have been with Moses, I will be with you. I will not fail you or forsake you." And then four verses later, Joshua 1:9, "Be strong and courageous! Do not be in dread or be dismayed, for Yahweh your God is with you wherever you go."

Now that's a promise and the principle that every Christian can live by and claim. If we remained always aware of the Lord's presence, it would keep us from sinning, it would lift our spirits when we're downcast, it would see us through really any trial or difficulty life could ever throw at us. We actually sing this all the time in a hymn that's drawn from Isaiah 43:2, listen to that verse. God says, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they will not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched, nor will the flame burn with you." God says, "All of that is true because I am with you." And that verse was made into a stanza in one of our best known hymns "How Firm a Foundation." We sing it all the time. We don't think about it enough.

For Joseph, this must have been a conscious thought perpetually in his mind that God was always with him, and that's why he persevered. That's why there's never any disqualifying sin or major character flaw in all of the biblical record about Joseph. That's rare, by the way, for biblical characters not to have anything negative recorded about them. But Joseph never shows

any signs of discouragement. Even while he is being subjected to every kind of misery and affliction, God was with him, and I believe he knew it.

And furthermore, Joseph was not leaning on the arm of flesh, despite his brother's resentment when he told them those dreams. There is zero evidence that Joseph himself ever placed any trust in his own native skills or talents. He wasn't thinking, "What a great person I am," he was thinking, "What a great God I have." And he knew to give all of the credit and the glory to the Lord for everything good that ever came into his life.

You see that in our text. And, in fact, this brings up Reason Number Two why I believe Joseph's attitude and life are so exemplary. Number One: "He had Yahweh's presence." Now, Number Two: "He acknowledged Yahweh's perfection." He knew full well that all glory rightfully goes to God. You see that in his answer to these two high-powered prisoners. They're looking for a high-powered dream interpreter, but there is no one to interpret, verse 8. And Joseph's reply: he doesn't step up and say, "Well I can do it." He says, "Do not interpretations belong to God?" He gives God the glory right from the beginning. He knows that all true glory belongs to God, and he reveres God, because he's aware of and he appreciates and acknowledges Yahweh's own absolute perfection, God's omniscience, His omnipotence, His omnipresence, His wisdom, His goodness – all the other aspects of God's perfection. We refer to those things as divine attributes, and that's OK.

But understand, that is not a list of different traits that we put together in order to construct the character of God. God is not composed of parts. What we call "the attributes of God" are simply different aspects of God's singular perfection – His holy, transcendent perfection. In short, He alone is glorious, and all glory therefore belongs to Him. And Joseph understood that with surprising clarity for someone who had been from his younger years deprived of home and family and education. And therefore, when the cup-bearer and the baker complained that there is no one to interpret their dreams, Joseph immediately responds with an answer that, of all things, recognizes God's singular glory.

There is no one like God. He alone can explain what otherwise cannot be explained. "Do not all interpretations belong to God?" He's saying, "Why would you look to anyone other than Yahweh to untangle the meaning of a mystery?" And his answer is a similar statement of the very same message we're given in Isaiah 8:19, where Isaiah writes, "Now when they say to you, 'Inquire of the mediums and the spiritists who whisper and mutter,' should

not a people inquire of their God? Should they inquire of the dead on behalf of the living?"

Joseph gets that, and so he gives glory to God even in the pit. He's also making it clear that he, Joseph, personally doesn't possess the skill of interpreting dreams. He won't claim honor, even though later they want to give him the honor and say, "This guy can interpret." He doesn't present it as his ability to tell the meaning of their dreams; but he knows that God is with him, and that God can easily decipher what seems indecipherable to human minds. And so, he says, "Recount your dreams to me, please." And then in the simplest, most honestly straightforward way possible, he just tells each of the men the true meaning behind their dreams.

Now I want to stress again this kind of revelation by dream, or messaging from God by dream, is rare even in Scripture; this is not a method by which God routinely communicates truth to His people. In fact, I would classify this, this case here in particular, more as a divinely orchestrated providence, an act of providence where God is using Egyptian superstition to make His point. And nowhere does Scripture ever encourage the people of God to look for meaning in our own dreams. Don't ever do that.

Indeed, We are given a more sure word of revelation in the form of Scripture, to which Peter says, "You do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your heart." Peter's saying, "Between now and the coming of Christ you have no more clear message from God. You should look for no more clear message from God than what is revealed to us in Scripture, that more sure prophetic word." People who seek God's guidance privately through dreams and voices in their head always go astray spiritually, so watch out for that, and don't mistake what's in this chapter as permission to do that.

Once more, on those extremely rare occasions where the Bible says God did speak directly to His people in dreams, what's significant there is that the message is always clear and unmistakable. And there's no mystery about who's speaking or where this came from. There is no mystery even to untangle or secret message to decode. When God speaks, He does it with clarity. So looking for secret messages in dreams is an occult practice that Scripture actually forbids. Jeremiah 29:8-9, "Thus says Yahweh of hosts, the God of Israel, 'Do not let your prophets who are in your midst and your diviners deceive you, and do not listen to your dreams which you dream. For they prophesy a lie to you in My name; I have not sent them,' declares

Yahweh." So he puts the dreams we dream in the same category with false prophets.

God does, however, for His own wise and holy purposes, sometimes use even delusions and false beliefs, and sometimes even false prophecies and things including the superstition of Pagans. He will use those things in the outworking of His providence. You see it, I think, in the case with the Magi at Jesus' birth. These guys were mystical wise men and astrologers who adhered to the Zoroastrian religion coming from the east, and God employed their superstition and a star that He personally moved; He linked that to their superstition in order to draw them to Bethlehem to see Christ and honor Him.

And Joseph, of all things in the Old Testament, seems to have had an advanced understanding of how God works through providence; and that, I believe, is the third factor we see here in Genesis 40 that explains why it is that Joseph's faith, hope, and love survived intact, despite all of the adversity he suffered, First, "He had Yahweh's presence." Second, "He acknowledged Yahweh's perfection." Now third, "He understood Yahweh's providence." Somehow he understood, even though he didn't have Romans 8:28, he understood that "For those who love God, all things work together for good for those who are called according to His purpose." And he had seen God's purpose in two separate dreams while he was still a boy, and he clung to that hope in all of his adversity. He's like what it says of the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11: "He endured as seeing Him who is unseen." He saw the hand of God in everything that happened to him.

Now, spoiler alert here, because you're going to get to this; but I have to say it, because it really is germane to this point. We know that Joseph saw the hand of God in everything that happened to him, because when you get to the end of the biblical narrative about him, he utters that famous line, Genesis 50:20, where he tells his brothers, "You meant evil for me, but God meant it for good." And long before that he had told his brothers already, Genesis 45:5, "Do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. God meant it for good."

You know what? That is not a truth Joseph discovered after he saw how much good came out of his suffering. He knew during the suffering that God meant it for good, and He would use it for good. And Joseph's faith is implicit, it's absolute, it's unquestioning. You don't see him complaining

about how life is unfair. You never see him questioning God, even the way Job does; and Scripture says Job was the most righteous man on earth. So he's not a bad guy, but Joseph seems even to have a higher understanding of the goodness of God. His faith therefore is not the kind of faith that is swayed by circumstances.

Just think about this. Genesis 37:2 says Joseph was seventeen years old when his brothers sold him into slavery. And then according to Genesis 41:46, he was thirty years old when he was finally released for the last time from that Egyptian dungeon. So he spent all that positivity, all that hope that you see him, he maintains that as he spends thirteen years of pit-dwelling and disappointment. It's amazing. Through all of that time, he could see beyond the circumstances and watch the hand of God; and he knew that no matter what happened, God had a good purpose in it. That's how he thrived, even in prison. And in the next chapter, you are going to see the beginning of the end of his troubles when he again is going to be called upon to interpret a pair of dreams, this time for Pharaoh himself; and then every bad thing that has ever happened to him up to that point, suddenly it all makes perfect sense, because God did have a purpose to use Joseph to save many people's lives.

A lot of commentators have pointed out that there's a string of similarities between Christ and Joseph, and I think there is a true sense in which he is a foreshadowing of Christ. Even though Scripture doesn't expressly draw that connection for us, I think you can see it. He was betrayed by his brothers, and he was sold for a few pieces of silver. He was left to die, he was raised from the pit, he was numbered with the transgressors – and you could go on. I think J. Vernon McGee had a list of 40 things like that.

All of those comparisons remind us of the wise and ordered way God has written the grand story of redemption. Sometimes we see these hints and pictures, and they're like reverse echoes of the gospel that happened before the truth of the gospel is fully declared to us. And in that sense, Joseph does point us forward to Christ, who voluntarily humbled Himself to an even greater degree than Joseph's humbling. Christ willingly suffered infinitely more than Joseph ever suffered, and He did it all to save many people's lives, by paying the price of their sin, and by imputing to them His righteousness.

We sang two great hymns about that this morning. That's the gospel, and that is what we celebrate today as we come to the Lord's Table, which we're

going to do now. Before we close this morning, we're going to honor the glory of God in worship by eating and drinking together from the Lord's Table.