

Prepared for Great Usefulness: Part 1 – Genesis 40

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Genesis

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Bible Text: Genesis 40
Preached on: Sunday, July 19, 2015

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Announcer: Have you ever felt like you are just stuck in life and though you believe God has good plans for you, you really don't seem to be going anywhere? That is most likely how Joseph felt as he spent years in prison for a crime he never committed. Welcome to "Doctrine for Life" with Dr. Joel Beeke. Today's broadcast contains Part 1 of Dr. Beeke's message on Genesis 40. Joseph served God faithfully wherever God sent him and his condition in prison had improved as men recognized Joseph's faithfulness and his gifts, and yet he seemed stuck there. What was God doing? As you listen, may the Spirit give you ears to hear and a heart to believe the words of eternal life.

Dr. Joel Beeke: Dear congregation, in Genesis 40, the roller-coaster life of Joseph continues. Up and down, up and down, up and down he goes. He begins life, well he begins life up, doesn't he, as a favored, pampered son of an old patriarch who gives him an embroidered coat, but then he goes down, down into the pit, down into slavery, down into Egypt. But then he's brought up again, as it were, from the dead to be the head of Potiphar's house, and now he's down again in a prison, a dungeon. But in Genesis 40, the roller-coaster begins to ascend again for the third and final time. Joseph is going to move up this time and he will not go down again. He will move up for good. But in Genesis 40, the roller-coaster seems to stop halfway up. It seems to get stuck there for two years, and it's not pleasant, is it, to be stuck, for example in an escalator, somewhere between destinations? But this is what's happening in chapter 20. Joseph is coming up but the roller-coaster stops. Yet we, unlike perhaps in an escalator, we sense that there's no panic in this chapter. Things are not out of control. Joseph's life is not chaotic. But we see patterns emerging. This is the second time he's put in prison, the second time that two dreams appear. Joseph had two dreams and now we see two dreams. We'll see two more dreams in the next chapter. But there's also a parallel between the last chapter and this chapter. In Genesis 39, a man was accused of an offense against his superior, his master's wife, and was put into prison. In chapter 40, two men are accused of an offense against their superior and are put into prison.

So what is going on here? Why all these repetitions and parallelisms? What's the purpose of all this? What is God doing in Joseph's life? Well, this morning I want to show you that this roller-coaster life is simply God preparing Joseph for greater usefulness. Joseph is a living example of what happens in our lives still today when God uses our down

times or our stuck times to prepare us for greater usefulness in his kingdom and to be used in his kingdom is one of the most valuable and rewarding and joyful experiences we can possibly imagine. In fact, every morning we ought to rise from our beds and say, "Lord, make me useful, greatly useful, greatly fruitful today. Help me to live every hour today, yes, every minute today to thy glory and in all that comes my way today, also the down things and the stuck things that seem to go nowhere. Prepare me. Prepare me for greater usefulness."

You see, dear believer, I want to show you this morning that also your down times and your stuck times are of divine appointment to prepare you for bigger and better and greater things, and that your life too even in such times as not chaotic, for every detail, every detail is under God's control. So Joseph in God's preparation of Joseph in this chapter, has a very great deal to teach us about how God prepares us for greater usefulness.

So our text this morning is Genesis 40. I want to read again verses 21 through 23,

21 And he [Pharaoh] restored the chief butler unto his butlership again; and he gave the cup into Pharaoh's hand: 22 But he hanged the chief baker: as Joseph had interpreted to them. 23 Yet did not the chief butler remember Joseph, but forgot him.

So our theme this morning is "Prepared for Great Usefulness." Now we want to see that by a faithful Lord, by a fruitful gift, by a forgetful butler, by a forgiving Savior, and by a forgotten baker. Prepared for greater usefulness by a faithful Lord, by a fruitful gift, by a forgetful butler, by a forgiving Savior, by a forgotten baker.

Now in Genesis 40, we know as we saw last week, that the Lord has been with Joseph and has been already training Joseph for leadership. So despite being removed from his family and despite being in prison, despite all the mystery of God's leadings, Joseph's dreams are still intact, one day his family will bow down to him, but great challenges will await Joseph when he will soon be elevated to the viceregency of Egypt. Egypt lay at the center of this world's power and evil, and Joseph, as far as we know, would be the only God-fearing righteous leader in the midst of the powers that be in Egypt. He would face many challenges and temptations. There would be many Mrs. Potiphars all around. There would be many cookie jars alluring him. There would be a whole series of temptations. His pagan associates would specialize in returning evil for good. So Joseph needed to be prepared for this amazing position of power that we will see tonight, God willing, God puts him into. That's why on the eve of this great ascension into the position of, for all practical purposes, being the number one man in world power in his day, God determines that Joseph needs still a bit more training, training in the Egyptian prison to be fit for the Egyptian palace, and that, I submit to you, is what Genesis 40 is all about.

Now Genesis 40 begins with two influential Egyptian officials brought into contact with Joseph: the chief butler, or we could say, the chief cup-bearer; and the chief baker. Now you need to know that tyrants in those days were always suspicious of people poisoning

them or undermining their power, or plots of treason, and for good reason, it was common in those days that the powers that be would often be challenged by underlings who would seek to usurp their authority. So the person who doctored the king's wine and the person who prepared his food, were actually two of the most important people in the Egyptian kingdom. You might call them Pharaoh's top security agents. Later on, you know, Nehemiah would actually hold the same position as the butler or cup-bearer and that was, as we know, a very prestigious position.

Now we don't know why these two highfaluting officials among Pharaoh's courtiers were thrown into prison. We just know that they offended the king and he was angry with them. Were they plotting treason? Or perhaps at least the baker, plotting treason? Or was it something so small that Pharaoh simply got sick after a meal and he got suspicious, either the butler or the baker was trying to poison him? You see, it might have been something very serious, it might have been something trivial like he got food poisoning, but they were in extreme danger. Something had transpired that aroused Pharaoh's anger and, of course, Pharaoh, being treated as a god among the Egyptians, could do whatever he wanted with them, no questions asked.

Now in God's providence, these two men are brought to the very prison where Joseph is and interestingly, that's actually fascinating, in verse 4 we read that Potiphar, you remember he was the captain of the guard, assigns these two men to Joseph and asks Joseph to attend to them, the original Hebrew says, to take care of them. So here in God's mysterious providence and through Potiphar's intervention, the Hebrew slave Joseph, who has been cast into prison, ends up running the prison and is now in daily contact with two of the most important civil servants in the number one world power, Egypt.

Now this remarkable providence, I think, underscores two things for us. The first is that it reinforces what I hinted at last Sabbath that Potiphar was not just angry at Joseph but also at his wife and had mixed feelings about the whole thing of putting Joseph in prison in the first place. You remember, he didn't kill Joseph which he normally would have done had Joseph really cheated on his wife, but here you see we have every indication that Potiphar had learned if he had distrusted Joseph a bit, that Joseph was totally trustworthy after all. By putting these two high officials in Joseph's charge, Potiphar is saying Joseph is an innocent man. Isn't that interesting because, you see, often when we get judged unfairly by others, God will vindicate us if we walk uprightly in due time.

But secondly and more importantly I think here in the context of the story, is that God seems again to be moving Joseph into a position of leadership so that he could be promoted to a position of great usefulness. Now we probably wouldn't see that here so clearly if we didn't know the end of the story and Joseph himself, of course, couldn't have seen that so clearly, but we see, knowing the whole story, God's gracious providence. God's plan is being fulfilled step by step and Joseph's meeting with the butler or the cup-bearer is actually the first step of his advancement and his subsequent enthronement, as again we show here this evening, as lord over Egypt.

What a confirmation this is, that God is always working out his purposes, his plans, in the lives of his people and his people need to learn to walk by faith in the midst of darkness rather than by sight, and learn to say with Job, "Even when things aren't going well in those dark moments of suffering, he knoweth the way that I take." You see, Job is saying, "I don't know what lies ahead of me but God knows. I don't have to know because God knows and I trust my life, also my dark times, my stuck times, into his hands."

Well then, how does this providence work out? Well, you know the history. The Lord causes each of these two men to have a very powerful and unusual dream and the following morning, they are both terrified by their dreams, a dream about three branches of grapes being squeezed into Pharaoh's cup, and a dream about three baskets of bread. Now these dreams are very significant, not only because the Egyptians put a great stock in dreams since they believed that sleep put them in contact with another world, but more importantly these dreams were important because they were from God. These were not just ordinary dreams that you can shake off. You know, boys and girls, you have a bad dream and sometimes you try to go back to sleep and the dream just keeps coming back, well, maybe you're better off getting up for 5 or 10 minutes and trying to get it out of your system and you go back to bed and everything's okay and you realize it was a dream and you're relieved. But this was something different. This was something more. God was in these dreams. That's why Joseph said in verse 8, "Do not interpretations belong to God? tell me them, I pray you." Joseph was a prophet. He and Daniel were the only two prophets in the Old Testament, as far as we know, that had been given the gift to reveal the meaning of dreams, and reading Ecclesiastes 5:3, "For a dream cometh through the multitude of business; and a fool's voice is known by multitude of words." You see, dreams can have very bizarre things, weird things coming at us in them, but these are dreams with meaning.

Many of our dreams make no sense but these dreams are dreams of meaning and we know that because both men feel it to the core of their being, there is a vividness about these dreams. There is an impression left by these dreams and they share these dreams, these two men with each other, and discover there are parallelisms everywhere in their dreams. This cannot be chance. Both dreams are about their occupations. Both dreams have the number three figured prominently in them. And both dreams troubled those who dreamed them in a profound way, so much so, their entire demeanor is shaken and Joseph notices it right away in the morning and says, "Why are you so sad?"

Now interestingly, do you notice here how kind Joseph is? Joseph isn't in this prison feeling sorry for himself. Joseph isn't downcast. He's not saying, "Oh, poor me." But Joseph is teaching us an important principle of leadership that's going to help him in his future position and that is this, that one of the best things you can do when you're in down times or stuck times is actually take an interest in other people. As someone has said, "He who is wrapped up in himself is wrapped up in a small parcel." But that was not Joseph, you see. Joseph was not resentful, not bitter, his life didn't focus just around himself, he didn't allow himself to get too discouraged. He knew God was with him and that was everything.

So Joseph had the energy in the midst of down times to minister to other people and to draw them out. "Tell me," he says, "tell me your dreams, I pray you. Why are you so sad? I care about you." Joseph is a people person like the greater Joseph. He cared about other people. He's approachable. So we see a new light on Joseph here. We've already seen that he's honest, that he's very able, that he's very efficient, but now he comes across as caring and sensitive, is personally modest yet having courage and good PR skills to get people to open up to him, and all of these things are important, you see, important preparations for positions of usefulness and leadership.

So when these men see Joseph's sincerity and his caring attitude, well, they naturally tell him their disturbing dreams and Joseph, having this gift, is able to interpret them and he interprets both of them rightly, the Bible says. The baker is hanged and the butler is restored to favor.

Now, of course, Joseph still doesn't know how that this would open a door for him two years down the road to be delivered from prison and to be catapulted to the palace and throne of Egypt, but we know God's hand in all of this. This is all God's preparation, all God's way of bringing Joseph to Pharaoh so that he might serve as Prime Minister of Egypt. Joseph wouldn't even have met these men if Pharaoh hadn't sent them to prison and if Potiphar hadn't sent Joseph to prison, he wouldn't have met them either. So he just would have stayed in Potiphar's house and would not have been elevated to such a position.

I hope you can see what God is saying to us today through this. It's actually so obvious. God is saying to us through Joseph that in those times in our lives when all seems dark and we don't understand, we have to believe if we're believers that God is still with us and that he's overruling us in his merciful providences and he has plans for us in store that we do not yet realize. He is a surprising God, we often say don't we? And he's always a faithful God.

So what Joseph could later say is so true of every moment, every down moment in the lives of God's people, "Ye meant it for evil but God meant it for good." And dear child of God, that's what you ought to say. That's what you ought to say to yourself at every dark period in your life, "God intends this for my good. God intends this for my good. God intends this for my good. God intends this for my good." Over and over and over and over again. I think that's what Joseph did in the inner prison. He knew God was faithful. He knew his family would bow down before him. He knew that God would find a way even as he sat in darkness, and so that gave him strength to be kind, it gave him strength to be faithful, it gave him strength to be caring in the midst of darkness.

God is a faithful God and through that faithfulness seen here by bringing these men into Joseph's life and paving the way for his exultation, we see God preparing Joseph for greater usefulness, but secondly as I've hinted already, Joseph is also being prepared for greater usefulness by a fruitful gift. He says, "Do not interpretations belong to God?" So this is a great gift but then he says, "tell me them." One writer says about this, that this is a polemic challenge to the religion of Egypt because the Egyptians had so many dream

interpreters but nobody could do this like Joseph, so Joseph, you see, has an absolute conviction that God has given him this gift. "Tell me them," he says.

Well, the butler goes first. He tells Joseph his dream. You can see that in verses 9 through 11. He sees a vine with three branches that are blossoming, clusters of grapes are on the vine. He is seen in this dream holding Pharaoh's cup and he says, "I took the grapes and pressed them into Pharaoh's cup and I gave the cup into Pharaoh's hand," and immediately Joseph says in verses 12 and 13, "This is the interpretation thereof." You see, he has a gift, an amazing gift. He says, "Three branches are three days, but in three days Pharaoh will lift up your head, restore you into your place, and you shall deliver Pharaoh's cup into his hand as you used to do." The butler is listening to Joseph, he's speaking with such precise and authoritative assurance and he rejoices. He feels there's truth in this.

Well, that happy outcome gives the baker courage to share his dream too, verses 16 and 17. In his dream, he sees a basket of all kinds of loaves of baked goods and the birds eat them out of the basket that was on his head, and immediately Joseph says, "This is the interpretation." Those three baskets are, again, three days, but since the baker never delivered the bread to Pharaoh in his dream because the birds came and ate it up, Joseph tells him in verse 19 that the meaning is he would never again deliver bread to the king's table but he'll come under the king's judgment and he'll be decapitated and hung as criminal.

So Joseph has this wonderful ability to interpret dreams and in the next chapter, as we'll see tonight, he interprets two dreams of Pharaoh also which God uses this fruitful gift, you see, to prepare him and actually to catapult him to this position of Prime Minister in Egypt. And what is remarkable about Joseph's use of this fruitful gift and preparatory, is his utter honesty in interpretation. He was obliged, you see, to give the full and correct interpretation. 1. Because he told the baker he would, 2. because he was a prophet of the Lord who was obliged to tell the full truth, and 3. because the full truth was actually for the baker's good. The baker had three days now to repent and to get right with God and there was a man in prison who could tell him the way of the Gospel and he could go to Joseph and say to him, "How can my soul be saved?" It's not too late for the baker. Joseph is actually doing him a favor by telling him what's coming.

And you see in Joseph here, don't you, a faithful example of all Gospel preachers. We are called as ministers of the Gospel to be Josephs, to not only tell butlers good news upon repentance and faith, but also bakers bad news, apart lack of repentance and faith. We are to look the butlers straight in the eye and say, "All shall be well with you by the grace of God," but we're also to look the bakers straight in the eye and say, "You will perish in a short while if you don't repent and believe the Gospel."

Announcer: Thank you for listening to "Doctrine for Life" with Dr. Joel Beeke. It is our prayer that God would use these broadcasts to write the doctrines of his word upon your minds so that the Holy Spirit would form the life of Christ within your hearts. May God grant that it is so. Amen.