

Genesis 39-40: Joseph's Trials in Egypt

An Outline

- I. Potiphar's wife abuses Joseph with enticement and lies (39:1-20a).
 - A. The LORD is with Joseph in Potiphar's house (39:1-6a).
 - B. Joseph rebuffs advances by Potiphar's wife (39:6b-12).
 - C. Potiphar's wife falsely accuses Joseph of rape, and Joseph is imprisoned (39:13-20a).
- II. Joseph Interprets dreams for the king's cupbearer and baker in prison (39:20b-40:23).
 - A. The Lord is with Joseph in prison (39:20b-23).
 - B. The King's cupbearer and baker are imprisoned (40:1-4a).
 - C. The cupbearer and baker both have troubling dreams (40:4b-8a).
 - D. Joseph interprets the cupbearers dream favorably (40:8b-15).
 - E. Joseph interprets the baker's dream unfavorably (40:16-19).
 - F. Joseph's interpretations come true but the cupbearer forgets about Joseph (40:20-23).

Observations

1. **The LORD was with Joseph (Genesis 39:2; 20-21):** Even though the LORD blessed him with successful management, there is no indication that Joseph's life was easy and comfortable. Right up to his ascension to Pharaoh's right hand, he considered his experience as "trouble" and "suffering" (Genesis 41:51-52). God prospered Joseph in Potiphar's home, but he was still a slave. God prospered him in the Egyptian prison, but he was still a prisoner. Even the lingering memory of how his own brothers were willing to kill him and profit from selling him as a slave must have filled him with sleepless nights. Even in the Old Testament, the gospel of prosperity does not hold true. The lives of the patriarchs, Joseph, Moses and the servants of God were not filled with ease and prosperity but were often full of trouble, hardship and heartache. Yet, God was WITH them all. This is to remind us that in this life we will experience trouble, but we can experience peace in the Lord: "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). There is a contrast between what we experience in the here and now versus our hope in heaven, which makes even the greatest suffering unworthy of comparison (Romans 8:18).
2. **"How can I do such a wicked thing and SIN AGAINST GOD?" (Genesis 39:9)** When Potiphar's wife tries to entice Joseph to sleep with her, he explains that it would be wrong for him to go against his master in this way. But he does not say, "and sin against him." He says, "and sin against God." It is God, who has forbidden adultery, which appears to be understood as sin even before it is codified later in the Mosaic Law. Like Joseph, when David acknowledges his sin, he too declares that it is against God: "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight" (Psalm 51:4). While one might think of David's sin against Uriah the Hittite and perhaps even Bathsheba, his sin was primarily against the Law Giver, which is God. When we sin against each other, we also are sinning against God. This is why unintentional sins that men committed against each other required a sacrifice to God for atonement (i.e. forgiveness). The Law never spoke of forgiveness between men but always forgiveness from God. Even when we forgive each other in the New Testament, it is only in Christ and with God's approval because there is no inherent violation of any law of our own but only what God has established in His Word. Forgiveness requires a violation of Law, and when we sin, we violate God's Law and not our own; therefore, our forgiveness merely mirrors what God has forgiven. Otherwise, we have no authority to forgive, that is,

release the offender. The offender must still pay a price, whether to God or to the state, whose law he broke. David was the king, and the king may not have had any law that prohibited him from killing his own soldier or sleeping with his soldier's wife. But he violated God's law. His sin was against God.

These examples should remind us that every wrong thing that we do is ultimately an offense to God. Whether we are caught or not, whether there is immediate punishment or not, we should have such a view toward everything we do as that which honors God or dishonors Him. So Paul also writes, "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31).

3. **"Do not interpretations belong to God?" (Genesis 40:8)** Joseph is not preaching the Gospel here, but he is being a witness for the LORD. Later, when Pharaoh says, "I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it," Joseph answers, "I cannot do it... but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires" (Genesis 41:15-16). About a thousand years later, another servant of God, Daniel, would be interpreting the dreams of a foreign king, namely, Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel also had the same attitude, that it was not him but "God in heaven who reveals mysteries" (Daniel 2:28). On the other hand, Moses got in trouble for not giving honor to God at the waters of Meribah. God told him to speak to the rock, but Moses struck the rock with his staff saying, "Must WE bring you water out of this rock?" (Numbers 20:10). For this Moses and Aaron was prevented from entering the Promised Land.

In the New Testament, we are also called to be witnesses. In Acts 1:8 we read, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. In Mark 16:15 Jesus commanded, "Go into the world and preach the gospel to all creation." Finally, in Matthew 28:19-20 Jesus commanded, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."

Throughout biblical history the servants of God made Him known, culminating in the witness of Jesus Christ, of whom John writes, "No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known" (John 1:18). As Jesus made God known, so we are called to know God and to make Him known.

4. **"The chief cupbearer, however, did not remember Joseph; he forgot him" (Genesis 40:23)**. How could he forget about Joseph?! How upsetting it must have been for Joseph?! He must have realized that his prophetic interpretations came true and sat waiting for his vindication, as his friend the cupbearer put in a good word to the king for him. A few days would pass. A few weeks would pass. Perhaps, as head manager of the prison, he asked someone, "Any word from the cupbearer to the king?" But then, it would be painfully apparent to him that he was still a prisoner, and he could not inquire beyond the confines of his prison. And while he had prophecies for the baker and the cupbearer, he had no dreams to interpret about his own predicament. Many years later, there would be another wonder worker. He would open blind eyes, open deaf years, make the lame walk, even raise the dead, but when He was being led to the cross to be crucified, there was no deliverance, and at the height of his agony, he cried, "My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me!" even as he took the full weight of our sins upon himself.

It would be a full two years before Joseph would gain freedom. The Pharaoh would have a dream that no one could interpret and the cupbearer would remember Joseph. While the cupbearer felt shame at forgetting, he was not the one in control. God was. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter raised his sword to fend off Jesus' captors, but Jesus stopped him. He could gather a legion of angels at the snap of his finger, but then how would the Scriptures be fulfilled that says that it must happen this way (Matthew

26:54)?

It would only be later that Joseph would fully understand how God's hand was in all his ordeals and ultimate triumph. He would tell his brothers, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good, to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Genesis 50:20).

This is instructive for us. When we face problems, tragedies, or things that just don't make sense, we can still trust and hope in God. He is always in control, but He may not want to share with us what He is doing. He did not share with Joseph. He did not share with Job. Oftentimes, God keeps us in the dark to see if we will live by faith and not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). In the same way He tested the Israelites in the wilderness, that they might teach them that "man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD" (cf. Deuteronomy 8:2-3).

Discussion Questions

1. The Bible teaches that God is in control and works everything together for our good, that we might become more like Christ (Romans 8:38-39). Joseph, even though he was sold into slavery by his brothers, falsely charged of rape, wrongfully imprisoned, and forgotten by those he helped, nevertheless, trusted in the Lord. Reflect on your life, especially on how you handle conflict and adversity. How have you done? And how might the biblical truth of God's sovereign care and Joseph's example ideally guide your attitude and response?
2. Every sin is a sin against God. And if there is forgiveness, only God can truly forgive. Even if we were to forgive one another of wrongdoing that affects us personally, this does not guarantee God's forgiveness. In fact, if they respond to our forgiveness and kindness wrongly, it will only amplify God's judgment on them (Romans 12: 19-21; cf. Proverbs 25:22 and Psalm 140:9-10). As Christians our primary concern should be the offense against God (cf. Psalm 51:4), and as we seek to be reconciled to one another, that we remember the more important ministry of reconciliation that we are called to do, namely, to bring everyone to be at peace with God (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:11-21). When we are so caught up in preserving our personal rights, defending against personal affronts against us, how do reorient our thinking and our attitude so as to put God's interests first and to make what offends Him our chief concern?