



# LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

## Faithful Patience

### Genesis 40:1-23

Fr. William Klock

September 15, 2013 – Trinity 16

The story of Joseph's slavery in Genesis 39 is a reminder to us that trials and suffering are very much the lot of the saints. Joseph's case is particularly poignant because the story makes his innocence so clear. Sold by his brothers into slavery, he rises to a level of trust and prominence in his master's household, only to be falsely accused of trying to rape his master's wife and is thrown into prison. And yet, despite all of the disappointments Joseph faced, we're also told repeatedly that the Lord was with him. The Lord was with him from the start. Consider that his brothers had originally plotted to murder him. God saw that Joseph was spared and sold to a passing caravan instead. Consider that he could have been put to work slaving in the fields or on a construction project until he died. Instead, he found himself in the household of a prominent nobleman who saw that God was with him and made him his overseer. Consider that Joseph could easily have been executed on the spot when Potiphar's wife made her accusations, but instead, Potiphar had mercy on Joseph and had him jailed with the king's political prisoners. And, again, as we saw at the end of Chapter 39, the warden, just as Potiphar had, saw that God was with Joseph and placed him in charge of the prison. Has Joseph been treated badly? Yes. Has he been treated unfairly? Of course. But God has spared him far worse. And Joseph clearly knows it. As we'll see in Chapter 40, Joseph never loses faith in the Lord. Even though he's frustrated with the situations in which he finds himself, he never turns away from God or from his promises. And in that, Joseph serves as an example to us

of what grace in suffering looks like for the saints.

We don't know how long Joseph spent in prison. The total time he spent as a slave in Potiphar's house *combined* with his time in prison totals thirteen years, but the text doesn't tell us how that time breaks down. Chapter 40 begins with the words, "Some time after this". Considering the way those same words are used elsewhere, it suggests that a considerable amount of time has passed.

**Some time after this, the cupbearer of the king of Egypt and his baker committed an offense against their lord the king of Egypt. And Pharaoh was angry with his two officers, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker, and he put them in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, in the prison where Joseph was confined. 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)

Who are these two men? The king's in the ancient world feared being poisoned. Their cupbearers were responsible for keeping their food safe and for testing to be sure it wasn't poisoned. The king trusted his life to his cupbearer. And so this wasn't a position filled by a slave. The cupbearer was usually a wealthy and influential man. Many of them were foreigners who became close confidants of the king, and so they had the potential to hold significant political influence.<sup>1</sup> The chief baker was responsible for the king's food. Both of these men were close to Pharaoh and both could easily have been part of a conspiracy against him.

In contrast to Joseph, who was in the prison but innocent of any crime, we're told that these men had committed an offense against their

Lord. In Hebrew it says that they had sinned against him—or, at least, that Pharaoh believed or suspect that they had. We don't know what that offense or sin was, but it's safe to assume it had something to do with Pharaoh's food. He might have become sick after a meal and had these men imprisoned until evidence could be gathered against one or both of them. Whatever the specific circumstances, they're waiting in prison for a verdict or sentence from Pharaoh and they're there for quite some time. During their stay, the prison warden gives Joseph the job of seeing to the needs of these two VIP's.

Look now at verses 5-8:

**And 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. When Joseph came to them in the morning, he saw that they were troubled. So he asked Pharaoh's officers who were with him in custody in his master's house, "Why are your faces downcast today?" They 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)

The same night both men have dreams. Ordinarily a dream might not have left them so unsettled, but the storyteller reminds us twice that these men are prisoners. They're in a very vulnerable position. And the fact that they each had a dream on the same night makes it clear to them that the dreams are significant. They believed that the gods were trying to tell them something—and considering where they were, that "something" might be very bad news. And so when Joseph checks in on them in the morning he notices that something's wrong and asks what it is. They tell him, "We each had a dream last night, but since there's no one here to tell us what they

<sup>1</sup> K. A. Kitchen, "Cupbearer," in *New Bible Dictionary*, J. D. Douglas and N. Hillyer, eds, Second Edition (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity, 1982), p. 255.

mean—to interpret them—we don’t know whether to be afraid or glad.”

Now, remember that Joseph is “the dreamer”. Before his brothers sold him to the caravan, he’d had at least two dreams. And Joseph, probably from his own personal experience, knew that since dreams come from God, the interpretation of dreams must come from God too.

This would have been a foreign concept to the cupbearer and the baker. Ancient peoples believed that dreams *were* messages from the gods, but their gods were silent when it came to explaining those dreams. And so cultures like those of Egypt and Babylon developed a “science” of dream interpretation. Over the years, interpreters would listen to others tell them their dreams, then they would record what happened to that person after the dream and connect the symbols in the dreams with the events that happened afterward. These interpreters produced books that recorded what the symbols meant.<sup>2</sup> Had these men not been in prison, they would have gone to an interpreter so that he could consult his books and tell them what the dreams meant.

In contrast to what these men knew of the “science” of dream interpretation, Joseph, a lowly slave, has the audacity to suggest that dream interpretation isn’t a human art. Instead, the ability is a supernatural gift given by the same God who gave the dreams in the first place. These men were probably skeptical—especially the baker, who holds back until he hears what sounds like an authoritative and favourable interpretation of his friend’s dream.

Now, before we go any further, there are some things about dreams that need to be said. Are our dreams significant? Are they messages from God? It’s *possible* that *occasionally*

they are. That said, if God speaks to us through dreams, we ought to see those situations as *exceptional*. In the world of the Old Testament, dreams were part of a pagan worldview. When we look at God’s use of dreams in the Old Testament, he most commonly uses them to speak to pagans. This is something we see over and over: God stoops down and speaks to us at our level and in the language we understand. If we look further at the cases where God speaks to his people with dreams, we notice that most of those people are not far removed from paganism. God spoke to Jacob and Joseph in dreams in the early days of the covenant, long before the Scriptures were written. God used a dream to speak to Gideon—a man who was raised in a family with an altar to Baal and an Asherah pole in the yard. As his people matured, God spoke to them through the prophets and those words were recorded as Scripture. *Those Scriptures are now our standard*. Dreams are a flaky means of communication. In contrast the spoken or written word is clear. And so God says through Jeremiah, “Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let him who has my word speak my word faithfully. What has straw in common with wheat? declares the LORD” (Jeremiah 23:28). God gives preference to the spoken and written Word. As Christians we have the entirety of the Bible—the witness to God’s Word spoken through the prophets and apostles—and it not only serves as our standard by which to judge all other claims to revelation from God, but we also trust that it contains all things necessary to salvation. You and I have no further *need* for further revelation from God. Not only do most dream claims fall short of Scripture’s standard, the modern “science” of dream interpretation is rooted in the occult. We need to be cautious. Just because God spoke in dreams to these men in Genesis, doesn’t mean that all or any of our dreams today are from God. We have a far more sure witness to his

truth in the pages of Holy Scripture. A wise Christian invests himself in the study of the Bible, not his dreams.

Look now at verses 9-15:

**So the chief cupbearer told his dream to Joseph and said to him, “In my dream there was a vine before me, and on the vine there were three branches. As soon as it budded, its blossoms shot forth, and the clusters ripened into grapes. Pharaoh’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.” Then Joseph said to him, “This is its interpretation: the three branches are three days. In 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. Only 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. For 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.”**

Joseph has good news for the king’s cupbearer: “Pharaoh will find you innocent and in three days he’ll lift up your head and restore you to your old position of favour.” And we know that there was no doubt in Joseph’s mind about his interpretation. He knows the cupbearer is going to be released, and so as one innocent prisoner to another, he appeals this man: “Look, you’re innocent and I’m innocent. I’ve been here forever. I’m pretty sure they’ve forgotten about me! You can sympathise with my plight yourself. When they let you out, *please*, plead my case with Pharaoh and get me out of here!”

The cupbearer was innocent and had nothing to fear from the interpretation of his dream. The baker held back. He was guilty and he feared what

<sup>2</sup> John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), pp. 241-243;

Joseph might say. But since the cupbearer had such good news, the baker decides to tell his dream to Joseph. Maybe Joseph will have good news for him, despite his guilt.

**When 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, and 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.” And Joseph answered and said, “This is its interpretation: the three baskets are three days. In 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)

Joseph doesn't have good news for the baker. In three days, while the cupbearer's head is lifted up as Pharaoh pardons and restores him to a place of favour, the baker's head will be lifted up too—the Hebrew is exactly the same in each case—but in the baker's case it will be lifted up, literally—as in “lifted off”. In three days the baker has an appointment with the executioner's axe. In fact, his offense is so great that he'll not only be executed, but “hanged from a tree”. This is probably better translated as “impaled on a stake” and exposed for the birds to feed on. The Egyptians thought that this kind of execution would prevent the spirit from finding rest.<sup>3</sup> The baker was a dead man.

Three days later everything happens just as Joseph had said:

**On 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. He restored the chief cupbearer to his position, and he placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand.**

**But he hanged the chief baker, as Joseph had interpreted to them. Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him.** (Genesis 40:20-23)

Notice how the storyteller actually repeats the precise words Joseph used when he interpreted the dreams. Everything happened just as God had revealed to Joseph. And yet somehow the cupbearer forgets Joseph. This isn't a lapse in his memory. For some reason the cupbearer chooses not to bring Joseph's sad case to the king. Maybe it was prejudice against a foreigner. Maybe he was afraid of getting involved in a case that wasn't his business. We don't know, but he *chooses* to let Joseph languish in the prison for another two years.<sup>4</sup> The storyteller foreshadows the experience that Israel will have leading up to the exodus—a time when a new king ruled over Egypt who had forgotten Joseph and the blessing that had come through him and his people.

As we looked at Chapter 39 last week, Joseph's first round of trial reminded us that trials and suffering are part of the walk of faith. Here in Chapter 40, we get a closer look at the walk of faith itself *during* these times of trial. For thirteen years, Joseph waited. No doubt much that time seems fruitless. Many people might be tempted to think that God had abandoned them. Many people might be tempted to abandon God. But Joseph was patient. And Joseph's patience and faithfulness serve as a model for us.

Waiting, suffering, even persecution are part of life for God's people. Think again of Abraham and Isaac, waiting decades for God to fulfil his promise of a son. Think of poor Job, sitting on an ash heap while he scraped at his boils with a piece of broken pottery and waiting for God to vindicate his righteousness. Think of all the psalms in which the psalmists

cry out: “How long, O Lord?” Think of Jesus fasting and pray in the wilderness for forty days only to be confronted by the devil. Think of St. Paul, beaten repeatedly, imprisoned over and over, and eventually executed for his faith. Again, think of Jesus tortured, bloody, and crucified and yet innocent of any sin. God not only works through suffering; he brings good through suffering. Jesus even warns us: “If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:20). But he also exhorts us: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:10).

Joseph's story reminds us that even in our suffering, God is with us; even in our suffering, good will come. He reminds us that the saints *will* one day be vindicated. Through the suffering of one righteous man—through Joseph's suffering—God blessed his whole family and the entire nation of Egypt. Through Joseph's suffering, God fulfilled—in part—his promises to Abraham that he and his people would be a blessing to the nations. In that, Joseph prefigured Jesus. Through Jesus' suffering, redemption has been made possible for all humanity.

Brothers and sisters, Joseph reminds us that God is sovereign and that in the midst of troubles and suffering, we need to live confident in the knowledge of his sovereignty. Joseph was frustrated. He wanted out. But he continued to live the life of a saint. He continued to live prayerfully. He even continued to use his God-given gifts when opportunities arose. Even though things looked bad, he trusted God. The text says that God was with Joseph, but the story also illustrates very profoundly that Joseph chose to remain with God.

You and I are often tempted to do just the opposite. When I was in high school, my dad and I headed off across

<sup>3</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 200), p. 384.

<sup>4</sup> Nahum Sarna, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 280.

town so that I could visit a college fair. I was excited and raring to go, but dad had things to do around the house and we left later than I wanted. Five minutes down the road, our car started sputtering and then stalled. We got out, opened the hood, and saw that one of the radiator hoses had sprung a pinhole leak. A tiny stream of water was arcing up and landing right on the distributor cap. Off we went to the parts store for a new hose. I was *so* frustrated. Dad could tell and as we got back on the road and he reminded me to trust God. Maybe the delay was God's way of keeping us out of an accident. We never knew. The rest of the trip was uneventful. Many times we may never know exactly what God had planned, but I am certain of one thing: if nothing else, God used that even to give me a lesson that I'm still trying to practise.

I think of the year after you hired me as your rector. For nine months we waited for our house to sell. Veronica and I were very frustrated at times, and yet we trusted that God was sovereignly overseeing the situation. Recently I heard someone expressing frustration over a real estate problem and it was suggested that somehow it was the devil at work. Friends, Jesus defeated Satan on the cross. He has no power over the saints. And Satan isn't an evil god with supernatural powers to manipulate the real estate market. He's a fallen angel—a *creature* with limited powers under God's sovereign rule. As rebellious as he may be, God is still in control and as we see with Job, even if Satan is involved in our suffering, God never lets go of his chain; God never ceases to be sovereign. As Joseph will tell his brothers in a few chapters: "You meant this for evil, but God meant it for good."

Sometimes God lets us in on his plans after the fact, as he did with Joseph. He did the same when it came to the sale of our home. He spared us being insurance-less when we lost our baby

and as it turned out, he had better plans for us in terms of the home we purchased here. God was in control all along and working to give his blessing. And that's what he promises to do. Always. Even though we can't always see it at the time. As we wait, we need to live in patient faith and we need to keep an *eternal* perspective. It's through our faithful waiting that God prepares us for the work of his kingdom.

Brothers and sisters, we need to wait on God. St. James tells us, "Let *patience* have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." (James 1:4). In Hebrews we're reminded, "You have need of *patience*, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised." (Hebrews 10:36). And Jesus tells us, "By your *patience* you will gain your lives." (Luke 21:19). The secret to waiting for God is waiting on God. It's by simple trust and constant prayer, by loving fellowship and faithful obedience, that we are able to wait for God and to be ready when he does finally call us out the prison to do the work for which he's been preparing us.

Let us pray: Father, patience is not an easy thing for us to learn, but we ask that you would teach us. Give us the grace to trust you in our times of waiting and in our trials and tribulation. Give us patience to wait even when we can't see the end. And let us always be faithful in all circumstances to share your love and grace with others as a testimony of the fact that even in the darkest pit, you are with us. We ask this, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.