

[joseph]

:: genesis 39.20-40.23 ::

We're talking about Joseph today. His story of being thrown into jail is probably the quintessential prison passage of the whole Old Testament. In fact, this is the first time you even find the word prison in the Bible.

It's a long passage, so let's get through it then talk about what we're going to talk about. To catch us up, Joseph at around the age of 17 has been sold into slavery by his brothers. He was trafficked to Egypt, where he was sold again into the house of a wealthy ruler. There, he was falsely accused of attempted rape, and then we pick up the story of his imprisonment starting in Genesis 39 verse 20, where we read:

Genesis 39.20 - 40.23 - Then Joseph's master took him and put him into the prison, a place where the king's prisoners were confined. And he was there in the prison. But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him mercy, and He gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison. And the keeper of the prison committed to Joseph's hand all the prisoners who were in the prison; whatever they did there, it was his doing. The keeper of the prison did not look into anything that was under Joseph's authority, because the Lord was with him; and whatever he did, the Lord made it prosper.

It came to pass after these things that the butler and the baker of the king of Egypt offended their lord, the king of Egypt. And Pharaoh was angry with his two officers, the chief butler and the chief baker. So he put them in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, in the prison, the place where Joseph was confined. And the captain of the guard charged Joseph with them, and he served them; so they were in custody for a while.

Then the butler and the baker of the king of Egypt, who were confined in the prison, had a dream, both of them, each man's dream in one night and each man's dream with its own interpretation. And Joseph came in to them in the morning and looked at them, and saw that they were sad. So he asked Pharaoh's officers who were with him in the custody of his lord's house, saying, "Why do you look so sad today?"

And they said to him, "We each have had a dream, and there is no interpreter of it."

So Joseph said to them, "Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell them to me, please."

Then the chief butler told his dream to Joseph, and said to him, "Behold, in my dream a vine was before me, and in the vine were three branches; it was as though it budded, its blossoms shot forth, and its clusters brought forth ripe grapes. Then 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."

And Joseph said to him, "This is the interpretation of it: The three branches are three days. Now within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your place, and you will put Pharaoh's cup in his hand according to the former manner, when you were his butler. But remember me when it is well with you, and please show kindness to me; make mention of me to Pharaoh, and get me out of this house. For indeed I was

stolen away from the land of the Hebrews; and also I have done nothing here that they should put me into the dungeon.”

When the chief baker saw that the interpretation was good, he said to Joseph, “I also was in my dream, and there were three white baskets on my head. In the uppermost basket were all kinds of baked goods for Pharaoh, and the birds ate them out of the basket on my head.”

So Joseph answered and said, “This is the interpretation of it: The three baskets are three days. Within three days Pharaoh will lift off your head from you and hang you on a tree; and the birds will eat your flesh from you.”

Now it came to pass 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 butler and of the chief baker among his servants. Then he restored the chief butler to his butlership again, and he placed the cup in Pharaoh’s hand. But he hanged the chief baker, as Joseph had interpreted to them. Yet the chief butler did not remember Joseph, but forgot him.

I’d like us to focus on contentment this morning, because that is the theme that really jumped out at me as I looked at this passage. Of course, we know the entirety of this incredible plan that God was working out in Joseph’s life, how Joseph was used by God to save the known world during a time of severe famine and the great reunion with his family and fulfillment of his own boyhood dreams and all that, but look at Joseph in the midst of this passage and you can’t help but see a Godly, Biblical contentment.

On the physical or circumstantial level, everything about Joseph’s life was the opposite of what we would seek out for ourselves. He had no freedom. He had no hope for the future. The best years of his young life were going to be spent as a prisoner and a slave, separated from his family. He was captive in a foreign land. This is *literally* the worst case scenario.

In the text, the Holy Spirit almost pours salt on the wound as we read 3 times about how Joseph was confined. I tried to highlight that in the reading. Thrice more it talks about being in custody. You see a man who is absolutely tethered down, clearly by the will of God.

Yet, in Joseph, we see acceptance, contentment, service.

And we see that God brings an incredible amount of provision and spiritual prosperity to his life.

Look quickly again at chapter 39, verses 20 and 21:

Genesis 39.20-21 - Then Joseph’s master took him and put him into the prison, a place where the king’s prisoners were confined. And he was there in the prison. But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him mercy, and He gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison.

Now, Joseph didn’t have the knowledge that we have about what the Lord was doing in his life. Way later he gives us that incredible statement, “you meant it for evil but God meant it for good.” But right now he’s just in the thick of this situation.

But despite the circumstances, we see a man honoring God, serving others, living contented. Right off the bat we see Joseph being skilled in administration and gifted in leadership, finding favor with the people around him. But it wasn't that he was living a silver spoon life. Not at all. This may have been a more upscale prison than say Paul or Jeremiah experienced, but he still lived a life of service.

Look at chapter 40 verse 4:

Genesis 40.4 - And the captain of the guard charged Joseph with them [the Cupbearer and the Baker], and he *SERVED* them; so they were in custody for a while.

A few verses later we see that Joseph noticed that these guys were preoccupied and sad after their dreams. He goes to them and expresses care for them and seeks to encourage them.

This from a man who had his entire life stolen from him! How does this happen?

The key was that Joseph bought into the idea that his God was with him. He bought into the idea that where the Lord had placed them was where he was meant to be. He determined to be content and to work and to serve and honor God right where he was and he didn't kick against it. Because of that, we see the exaltation of Joseph and the glorification of God. Because he was a willing participant in God's plan for his life, because he wasn't a Jonah in his heart, God's people and much of the known world was saved from starvation and death.

Does that mean that Joseph was *happy* about his circumstances? No. Not at all. He says to the butler, "Hey, when you're out, *REMEMBER ME and get me out of here!*" Now, eventually that's what happens, but years after this passage. So, it wasn't that Joseph was all excited about his life as a foreign, enslaved prisoner. But he was confident that the God who had shown him mercy, the God who had given him favor, was determining his life. And he was ok with that. He was submitted to that.

So how does this work out for us?

Well, we look at this passage and see God's word describing Joseph and saying, "he was *THERE* in the prison". We look at that and know definitively that God had purposely placed him there so that a great work could be done and so that the Lord would be magnified through this young man's life. He was *THERE* in the prison so the Lord could purposefully prosper his ministry.

So where are you? Where do you find yourself? Where have you been scattered by the Lord as His disciple? What people are you around? Who around you is confounded? Discouraged? Saddened? Needing a message from God? What has been entrusted in your hands? Are you being trustworthy with the responsibilities, both spiritual and physical, that have been given to you by God?

It's clear throughout this story that the Lord was there with Joseph. He was pouring out mercy and gifting. He was paving the way for Joseph to find favor with those around him. He brought all kinds of opportunities to Joseph for ministry and service. But God also confined him in a set of circumstances that weren't ideal and that's where God worked in Joseph's life.

And when we look at our own lives, at least I know for myself, that I'm looking more for a Daniel type calling. Same sort of scenerio: Young man taken from his home, but almost immediately made into a ruler. No prison. No false charges of attempted rape. Daniel gets to Babylon and it's almost as if they're waiting there to shower him with monumental physical blessings.

But that's not how it works for everyone. You get to the New Testament and Jesus explains that He entrusts His people differently in the ministry and in the Kingdom. To some He's given 5 talents. To some He's given 2. To some He's given 1.

What happens is that I look at my 1 talent and I not only question God about how much more important I am, but I get disappointed by the fact that someone else has 2. Someone else has 5. "Lord, you've given that person 5 times more than me, and I deserve to be the biggest! I deserve to have the easiest, most prominent set of circumstances!"

But the problem is that we don't understand the incredible things that the Lord is working out through our lives and the circumstances He's brought us. And when we lose sight of God's will, when we move out of contentment, then we start neglecting what God's given us to do right now and we start trying to negotiate with Him based on what we think we should be receiving. I think I should be second in command over Egypt right *now* instead of what the Lord has going on. I want to be in a different field with a different group of people and a different climate.

But sometimes God confines us. In the necessary work that He's called us to do, there are always going to be moments of sacrifice and submission, because lives and eternities are at stake. And because Joseph found contentment in the God of mercy, the God of favor, the God of gifting, the God of strength, because of that the world was changed and his life was changed. He was able to rise above uncomfortable circumstances and impact people for the Lord. Because that God was able to do this prison prosper that we see. Because Joseph was on board.

We need to find contentment. We need to take hold of it. It doesn't mean we have to like everything that's going on in our lives, but it does mean that we relinquish control of ourselves and relinquish our idea of what our lives should be to the God who's already got it worked out. That is the way we get to this Joseph level of satisfaction and Godliness. He had vision. He had a dream to get out of the place he was in. That's fine. But along the way, he determined to have peace in God, show compassion and service to others, to be faithful with the lot God had given him in life.

I work at a church so a lot of times I think about size of ministry and prominence of pastors. And I was thinking the other day about how impossible and detrimental discontentment is. Because when we are trying to achieve something for ourselves outside of the will of God, we **cannot** be satisfied. I was thinking of it on the pastoral level. Maybe a pastor of a church of 50 just wishes he had a church of 500. Maybe the pastor of the church of 500 wishes he had the church of 5,000. It's alright to have vision, but we need to relinquish our futures to what God has set in front of us. Because if we're trying to free ourselves from the confinement that God has put on our lives, then it doesn't matter what you achieve. I can want to be Greg Laurie, and let's say I get there. But if it's not of God then it's not going to be enough because the flesh cannot be satiated. I may be Greg Laurie, but I'm not Billy Graham. I may be Billy Graham, but I'm not Charles Spurgeon. I may be Charles Spurgeon, but I'm not the Apostle Paul.

The point is that God has confined us to a specific time and place and people for a reason. He has put a talent or 2 or 5 into your hand so that you can work with what He's given you. And faithfulness to what God has given you is the Biblical pursuit of the Christian life. And if we're wrapped up in self-pity or self-glorification or discontentment, then the work God has entrusted us to do will be wasted. And the Lord's presence in our lives will be diminished. And, on top of that, our carnal desires will not be satiated.

God is with you. He's equipped you. He's poured out mercy and favor and opportunity. Now it's our turn and our time to engage and serve and trust that whatever is around us, the Lord means for good as we are faithful to walk in the paths and the directions that He has called us.