

Two New Prisoners


 JOSEPH


The captain of the guard appointed Joseph to be with them, and he attended them. They continued for some time in custody.”

Genesis 40:4



DEVOTIONAL

Clearly, Joseph had a more blessed time in jail than other prisoners, for he was placed in charge over the inmates, and he found favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison (Genesis 39:20–23). Yet these privileges did not alleviate his suffering completely. Today’s passage indicates he was in chains when not carrying out his appointed duties. He was “confined” while in jail (40:3), but a better translation of this word would be “bound,” showing that he was fettered at least some of the time. Later books of the Bible confirm this inference (Psalm 105:16–22), and so we see that Joseph endured bondage even as he was given some freedom in his role as supervisor in the prison.

We do not know exactly how long Joseph was imprisoned. It was a total of thirteen years from the time he was sold into slavery at age seventeen until he was appointed governor of Egypt when he was thirty (Genesis 37:2; 41:46), but we cannot determine the precise amount of time he spent in prison versus his length of service to Potiphar. Joseph doubtless found imprisonment an arduous test of his patience, especially in the time before he met the pharaoh’s cupbearer, who would offer hope to him that he would one day be released (40:9–15). Whatever its exact length, Genesis 40:1 implies that a great deal of time intervened between Joseph’s entry into prison and his hopeful meeting with the cupbearer and baker.

Joseph would find hope for his future in these figures because of the position they held in the pharaoh’s court. The cupbearer was among a pharaoh’s most trusted advisers, because his job was to taste the king’s wine and determine if it was safe for the pharaoh to drink. Only one who was supremely loyal to the king could be good for this position, and thus the cupbearer could wield a lot of influence over the king on Joseph’s behalf. Compare, for example, Nehemiah who was cupbearer to the Persian king centuries after Joseph died (Nehemiah 1:1–2:8).

Initially, Joseph is demoted when these two royal officials arrive. Incarcerated they may be, but they are still of high rank, and Potiphar makes Joseph serve them (Genesis 40:4). As in Potiphar’s house, Joseph has been raised up and is yet cast down soon afterward.

CORAM DEO (In the Presence of God)

Though time in prison could make anyone discouraged, Joseph does not waver from his consistent service. No matter the work he was given to do — overseer of the prison or attendant to the cupbearer and baker — Joseph continued to serve others and wait on the Lord. We should expect nothing less since patience has

always been a distinguishing mark of God's people (Galatians 5:22). Do you patiently wait for our Father to act or do you try to force His hand?¹



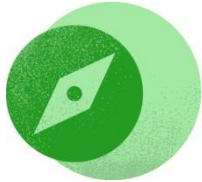
OPEN IT

1. Describe a time when you found yourself stuck (whether physically or figuratively). What kept you from moving ahead? How did being stuck make you feel? How did you get unstuck?



READ IT

Genesis 39:20–40:23



EXPLORE IT

2. Besides being a prisoner himself, what role did Joseph have in prison?
3. What two men did Joseph come in contact with at the prison?
4. What happened to each of these men?
5. What did Joseph ask the cupbearer to do?



APPLY IT

THROWN INTO A PIT

Our hero is in prison. Not because he did wrong but because he did right. Here is the single most important fact about Genesis 40. At the beginning Joseph is in prison. At the end he is in prison.

That's not fair, but there it is. In this chapter Joseph is waiting, because there is nothing else he can do. He can't get out of prison, he can't appeal his sentence, and he certainly can't escape. He's stuck in an Egyptian prison, far from home where they think he's dead anyway. He has been falsely accused of rape by Potiphar's wife. You don't have too many friends in that situation. So he waits. Most of us hate to wait.

¹ <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/two-new-prisoners/>

At this point readers of this story face a problem. Because we know how Joseph's life ends up, it's very easy for us to read Joseph's story in light of how it ends. We know that eventually he emerges triumphant, and that he will one day say to the brothers who betrayed him, **"You meant it for evil against me, but God meant it for good"** (Genesis 50:20).

Our problem is, we read this whole story as if Joseph himself knew how it was going to end. That's not true. When Joseph was thrown into the pit by his brothers, he had no idea what was going to happen next. He knew as much about his future as you do about yours. It's not as if God whispered, "Hang tough, kid. Don't let 'em get you down. Pretty soon you'll be the Prime Minister of Egypt." It didn't happen that way. This isn't a fairy tale. When Joseph is stuck in prison, he has no "inside knowledge" regarding how or when or if he will ever get out. He certainly knows nothing of the baker and the cupbearer. Joseph has no "inside knowledge."

So let's read Genesis 40 as Joseph would have lived it, with no hint of what the future might hold. Here's a short summary of this chapter:

**In jail. Two men. Two dreams. Two interpretations.
One lives, one dies. One forgets. In jail.²**

6. Psalm 105:16–22 gives a brief history of the life of Joseph. Scholars believe that verses 18–19 tell of his time in prison. What sights, sounds and scars would Joseph have experienced during this time of imprisonment?

It seems that Joseph was given a sentence of life imprisonment. This was a hard penalty, but the normal punishment for such a crime (attempted rape) by a slave upon a high official's wife would likely be death. Joseph received a merciful sentence.... Potiphar was merciful to Joseph because he suspected his wife's role in the matter. The anger aroused may have not been directed towards Joseph, but against the wife for manipulating him into a situation where, to save face, he had to dismiss the man who made the whole household run well. Death was the only penalty Joseph could reasonably expect. His reprieve presumably owed much to the respect he had won; and Potiphar's mingled wrath and restraint may reflect a faint misgiving about the full accuracy of the charge. (Kidner)³

7. How might you have responded if you had been wrongfully convicted and imprisoned? What would this type of trial have done to your belief in God?

A MODEL PRISONER

At this moment Joseph is chained in a filthy pit. Because of his faithfulness to God, he lost his job, his freedom, and his reputation. He appears to be a ruined man...BUT THE LORD WAS WITH HIM!!!

8. In what practical ways could a person in Joseph's situation experience the presence and steadfast love of God?

² Sermon by Ray Pritchard found @ <http://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/are-you-willing-to-wait-for-god/>

³ David Guzik Commentary on Genesis found @ <http://www.studydrive.org/commentaries/guz/genesis-39.html>

Let's face it, Joseph could have developed a rotten attitude. He had been terribly mistreated by his brothers. After a few years, he had finally overcome that by rising to the top in Potiphar's house. He obeyed the Lord by resisting Potiphar's wife, only to be thrown in this dungeon. It wouldn't be hard to imagine him being a difficult, disagreeable prisoner. Yet I believe that Joseph was an agreeable, cheerful prisoner who did his duties with a positive attitude. If he had been disagreeable, the jailer wouldn't have promoted him as he did.⁴

9. What type of thinking enables a person to do his job well while enduring such personal hardships?

How is your attitude when you're treated unfairly? Perhaps you think that your supervisor isn't being fair with you. He isn't recognizing your hard work. You have a choice: You can either become sullen and disagreeable, angry at God and at the world. Or, you can think, "God doesn't owe me anything but judgment, yet He's shown me so much mercy." And you can be cheerful and agreeable, doing your work with gladness in your heart as unto the Lord. As Paul instructed slaves, "Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men" (Colossians 3:23). You may need to communicate openly with the offending party, but first you need to deal with your attitude before God.⁵

10. What area of life has caused you difficulty? How can you mimic the ways of Joseph? How might such an approach change your perspective amidst your time of hardship?

Note, too, that Joseph didn't seek his own advancement, but rather sought to prosper his master, whether Potiphar or the jailer. These men noted that and advanced Joseph. That's a key principle in any situation, whether at work or at home: If you seek to make the one over you prosper, God will see to it that you're advanced in due time. That is directly opposite to the ways of the world, where you sabotage the guy over you so that you can grab his spot. As Christian workers, we should be seeking God's glory and not care about which worker gets the credit on earth.⁶

11. When have you received a promotion/recognition even though you weren't looking for it? In hindsight, what were you doing that caused someone to take notice?

Martin Luther King, Jr. put it this way:

Whatever your life's work is, do it well. A man should do his job so well that the living, the dead, and the unborn could do it no better. If it falls your lot to be a street sweeper, sweep streets like Michelangelo painted pictures, like Shakespeare wrote poetry, like Beethoven composed music; sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will have to pause and say, "Here lived a great street sweeper, who swept his job well."⁷

⁴ Sermon by Steve Cole found @ <http://www.fcfoonline.org/content/1/sermons/092499Evening.pdf>

⁵ Sermon by Steve Cole found @ <http://www.fcfoonline.org/content/1/sermons/092499Evening.pdf>

⁶ Sermon by Steve Cole found @ <http://www.fcfoonline.org/content/1/sermons/092499Evening.pdf>

⁷ Sermon by Martin Luther King Jr entitled: What Is Your Life's Blueprint? <http://old.seattletimes.com/special/mlk/king/words/blueprint.html>

12. Who has God placed in authority over you? In what practical ways could you honor and serve them better this week?

TWO DREAMS/TWO OUTCOMES

There are dreams all through Joseph's story. First he has them (Genesis 37), then these two men have them (Genesis 40), then Pharaoh will have a two-part dream (Genesis 41).

In each case the dreams prove crucial in Joseph's life. In Genesis 37 Joseph has dreams that he shares with his brothers, provoking their hatred even more. But in Genesis 40 the baker and cupbearer turn to Joseph to help them interpret their dreams. Joseph's willingness to interpret their dreams means that he has not yet given up on his own dreams. Even though many years have passed, and he has endured the pain of rejection, enslavement, false accusation and imprisonment, down deep inside he still believes that one day God will cause those early dreams to come true. Otherwise he would have said to the men, "My advice is, forget about those dreams. They don't mean anything. I had dreams of my own once, and look where I am now." But he didn't say that. And he doesn't say, "Don't worry, fellows. I'm an expert in dreams. I can figure this out for you."

Rather than giving in to despair or relying on false optimism, he points the men to God: "**Do not interpretations belong to God?**" (v. 8). His answer means something like this: "There is a God in heaven who gives dreams to men. He and He alone can explain the dreams you had. I don't have the answer in me, but I know the Lord and He can help you out."⁸

13. According to verses 5–7, Joseph has the wherewithal to notice the concerns of his fellow prisoners. What does this tell us about Joseph?
14. How can such a kind act bring relief to those around us? When has someone's concern about your troubles brought you encouragement?
15. What was the chief cupbearer's dream? What did it mean? How might this good dream have brought Joseph great hope?
16. What was the baker's dream? What did it mean? How might this nightmare have taught Joseph to be content?

⁸ Sermon by Ray Pritchard found @ <http://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/are-you-willing-to-wait-for-god/>

17. What lessons can we learn about being content in our own circumstances from these two men and their dreams?

When you read Genesis 40, you discover that Joseph tells the cupbearer that he will be released in three days and restored to his former position (vv. 12–13). No doubt he was delighted to hear the news. Then Joseph adds a personal request in verse 14: **“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.”**

While preparing this message, I ran across a Bible teacher who calls this a lack of faith on Joseph’s part. I don’t agree with that at all. If Joseph has been unfairly treated and if he’s not guilty, then why shouldn’t he seek his release? On one hand, he is faithful and ready to serve God where he is. On the other hand, he doesn’t want to stay in prison forever. It’s as if he’s saying, “I’m here but this is not my whole life.” “I accept where I am for the moment, but I hope to be set free eventually.” Two years later his request will lead to his release. I don’t think he ever regretted what he said.⁹

18. What are you waiting on right now? What words or feelings describe your present experience? What reasons would you give if someone asked, “Why do you want to be released from your prison cell?”

⁹ Sermon by Ray Pritchard found @ <http://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/are-you-willing-to-wait-for-god/>