

Sunday, August 2, 2020

Bible Study Genesis 39-41

Listen to Pastor Kelly's sermon for August 2, and then read Genesis 39-41.

As we look back over Joseph's life, we can readily admit that there is plenty there to be discouraged about. His first 17 years were spent as his father's favorite, but that special place in the family would likely have only alienated him from his brothers. That alienation then turns to resentment, and from resentment to hatred. He is sold into slavery and eventually thrown into prison.

Psalm 105:18 gives us a brief description of what Joseph's time in prison was like. It states, "His feet were hurt with fetters; his neck was put in a collar of iron." The iron collar around his neck and chain around his ankles would scrape against his skin and most likely would have made it difficult to even sleep. The Douay-Rheims Bible renders this verse in this way: "they afflicted his feet with fetters; the iron pierced his soul." The Hebrew text, can be translated to read, "Iron entered into his soul."

This tells me that these chains and fetters were not merely physical hinderances and afflictions. No, they were more than that. This tells me that Joseph's time in prison was a time for maturing spiritually. In his book *The Problem of Pain*, C.S. Lewis says, "God whispers in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain." Joseph appears to hear God clearly, and allows his experience in slavery and prison to strengthen that relationship, rather than weaken it.

Shaped To Fit Up There

Billy Graham once told of a friend who went through the Great Depression, losing a job, a fortune, a wife, and a home. He was a believer in Jesus Christ and tenaciously held to his faith even though he was naturally depressed by those circumstances. One day in the midst of his depression he stopped to watch some men doing stonework on a huge church in the city. One was busy chiseling a triangular piece of stone. "What are you going to do with that?" he asked. The workman stopped and pointed to a little opening near the top of the spire. "See that little opening up there near the top?" he said. "Well, I'm shaping this down here so that it will fit up there." The friend said that tears filled his eyes as he walked away from the workman. For it seemed that God had spoken to him personally to say that he was shaping him for heaven by the ordeal through which he was now passing.

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We have at least two choices when we face painful discouragements. We can become bitter and disillusioned or we can use our difficulties and disappointments as a means of displaying our hope and trust in God. This is what Joseph chose to do. Joseph drew closer to God in the midst of his circumstances. He drew closer to God and his disappointment did not lead to despair.

Joseph's reaction illuminates for us the resources we have when we face discouragement. In 40:8 Joseph tells the cupbearer and baker that interpretations of dreams belong to God alone. This suggests to us that he was convinced that only God knew the future. When he identified the dreams and told the truth concerning their meanings he was displaying confidence that God was therefore still in control. Though he was a slave, in a pit, in a prison, in a foreign land, Joseph never lost sight of the truth of God's sovereignty.

Next, we see Joseph ministering to others. He doesn't wallow in isolation and self-pity. He finds a way to serve others around him. 40:6-22 illustrates for us his care for the prisoners around him and his particular concern for the cupbearer and the baker. He was genuinely concerned about them. So much so that he noticed when they were troubled and downcast, and then he took the time to listen to them. Ministering to the pain and needs of others helped Joseph turn his focus away from his own suffering.

We also see that the Lord was with Joseph. In chapter 39 we are told three times that "the Lord was with Joseph" (vv. 2, 21, 23). This presence of the Lord is also implied in Joseph's qualifications about dreams (40:8 and 41:16). We can rest assured that Joseph's trust in the Lord and his selflessness in ministering to others could not have developed had Joseph abandoned prayer. We have no record of any of Joseph's prayers while he was in prison, but his sense of the Lord's leading would have been dulled or absent without that most important lifeline. Through it all, Joseph spoke with God and God made his presence known to Joseph.

Dear Christian, discouragement cannot stand up under the constant barrage of faithful prayer. Much more, discouragement doesn't stand a chance when we employ and draw strength from those same resources that Joseph used: trusting in God's sovereignty, ministering to others, and leaning into the very presence of the Lord Himself. Even much more, unlike Joseph, we also have the comfort gained from scripture, and from this fellowship of believers.

When we employ these resources, we acknowledge God's presence with us and his sovereignty over the events and circumstances of our lives. When we do this we

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orient our minds toward the things of God and focus on him and his plan, rather than the troubles of our circumstances. When we do this we are able to hand those circumstances over to him and allow his wisdom and power to transform them and redeem them and perhaps even shape us to be more fit for His purposes.

And so, may you find the comfort of the Lord's presence in the midst of your troubles. And may that comfort put 'iron into your soul' as it did for Joseph, so that others may see (as with Joseph) that 'the Lord is with you.'

Questions for Further Reflection

How do Joseph's prospects look in 39:1? How do they look in verse 39:20? How real do you think his dreams (*Genesis 37:5-11*) are to him at these times? Do you think Joseph recognized that he was in a prison for a purpose?

How would Romans 8:28-29 fit Joseph just now? How would it fit you? What truths about the relationship between God and Joseph are conveyed by Joseph's time as a slave and his time as a prisoner? In what way can you sense that "the Lord is with you," as he was with Joseph, in the midst of pressure?

How does Joseph show concern for the cupbearer and baker? What seems to be their primary distress? Does Joseph's reference to God ring true? What does the scene concerning the dreams tell us about Joseph's abilities? What does it tell us about his relationship with God? What does Joseph's request reveal about him?

Why might the chief cupbearer forget Joseph? How do you think Joseph felt about being forgotten? Have you ever been through a situation where you felt that God had forgotten about you? How did he show you that he hadn't? How might this story help you remember that God is always there?

How is the 30 year old Joseph of chapter 41 different from the 17 year old Joseph of chapter 37? How might the 13 intervening years of slavery and imprisonment have gifted him? How do you account for his maturity, zeal, and wisdom as a government official? In what ways have you changed from what you were 13 years ago? What did God do during that time to mold your character?