

## **Bethel Bible-Presbyterian Church**

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**DHW**

### **LESSON 31**

## **THE BOOK OF GENESIS**

### **Chapter 40**

#### ***INTRODUCTION***

One of the perplexing experiences of a Christian, who wants to live a godly life, is that he encounters hostility and sometimes he finds himself in adverse circumstances which are not of his doing. He may be confused because he knows that God is all-powerful and is in control of human affairs. As He is also a God of justice and love, should He not vindicate His people against their enemy and deliver them from bad situations? What actually is God doing to allow all these things to happen to His children? The answer to these problems in life is not easy, but if we are willing to be humble, patient and teachable, we will find the answer in the Word of God. In this chapter, we will begin to find some of the answers to these questions. The life of Joseph is a powerful illustration of God's way in

comforting and encouraging His children never to give up in their walk with Him.

Since the time that God had given Joseph two dreams of his exaltation above his brothers and even his parents, his experiences in life had been downward. He was sold to a caravan of merchants on their way to Egypt where he was subsequently bought by Potiphar to be a slave in his house. He was falsely accused of attempted rape on Mrs Potiphar and for that he was imprisoned. But the unseen hand of the LORD God was actually shaping and sharpening him to be the deliverer of His chosen people Israel in fulfilment of the covenant He had made with Abraham. Things that happened in this chapter to Joseph would prepare him his future advancement. Of course, Joseph did not know about that although he still remained believing in his dreams. His sufferings and disappointments are God's way of moulding his character. Once he was insensitive and arrogant but by the end of the chapter, he became sensitive and compassionate towards others.

The following is a suggested outline of the chapter:

- 1) Pharaoh's butler and baker were imprisoned in the place where Joseph was bound (40:1-4);
- 2) Joseph offered to help the butler and the baker in interpreting their dreams (40:5-8);
- 3) Joseph predicted that the butler would be reinstated to his former work after three days (40:9-15);
- 4) Joseph predicted that the baker would be hanged by Pharaoh after three days (40:16-19);
- 5) Joseph's interpretations of the dreams came true to the butler and baker (40:20-23).

### *STUDY THE WORD*

#### **Pharaoh's Butler and Baker Are Imprisoned**

The Westminster Confession of Faith defines the providence of God thus:

*God, the great Creator of all things, doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence, according to his infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of his own will, to the praise of the glory of his wisdom,*

*power, justice, goodness, and mercy*  
(Chapter V).<sup>1</sup>

We have already seen God's providence and protection upon Joseph, when he was put in prison instead of being sentenced to death for the alleged attempted rape of Potiphar's wife. Now that he was in prison, he was joined by two of the king's most "trusted" servants, the chief butler and the chief baker. It is providential that they were put in the prison where Joseph was held. Precisely what was the nature of their crime we are not told. But we are told that *they had offended their lord the king of Egypt* (v.1). The word "offended" in Hebrew is the word for sin (*chata*). So the wrongdoing was of a serious nature that incurred the anger of Pharaoh, who put them *in ward* into prison (v.3). The term "in ward" expresses the idea that they were put in custody awaiting Pharaoh's sentencing of them pending the result of the investigation into their sin.

It is significant that these two new prison inmates were put in the same prison ward where Joseph was, and not only that, Joseph was to take charge of them and to serve them!

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<sup>1</sup> G.I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith for Study Classes*, (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1964), 46.

Interestingly *the captain of the guard* assigned Joseph the special responsibility and duty to look after the two servants. In the previous chapter, Potiphar was designated as *the captain of the guard* (39:1). And it is probable that it was the same Potiphar, who *charged Joseph with them, and he served them* (v.4). That tells us that Potiphar might have known the truth about the alleged accusation against Joseph by his wife. Joseph was an upright man. In prison, he also consistently displayed the same trustworthy, conscientious and competent self.

They were in prison for *a season* but how long we do not know (v.4). Joseph was about seventeen years old when he was sold to the Midianite merchants. The period he was serving as a slave and imprisonment was about thirteen years.<sup>2</sup> This contact between Joseph and both servants was providential for it resulted in the eventual release and ascendancy of

Joseph to the court of the king. If this connection, which was part of a chain of situations, did not happen, then Joseph would still be in prison or somewhere else. Nothing therefore happens by mere chance or luck. This happening was the turning point of Joseph's life. Joseph needed to learn a couple of things before God raised him to the second highest and most powerful position in Egypt. How wonderful it is to be in the will of God!

### Joseph Offers to Interpret the Dreams

One night, the butler and the baker each had a dream. They could relate the details of their dreams. Their own dreams were vivid to them. This is quite uncommon, as most people, do not remember all the details of their dreams. However, the next day, Joseph noticed that they were not looking as cheerful as usual. In fact they looked quite sad. This prompted Joseph to ask them (v.7): *Wherefore look ye so sadly today?* They both admitted that they had a dream and there was no one to interpret their dreams. Ancient Egyptians believed in dreams because sleep would put them in contact with the nether world. So the butler and baker were

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 37:2 - *These are the generations of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was feeding the flock with his brethren; and the lad was with the sons of Bilhah, and with the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives: and Joseph brought unto his father their evil report.*

Genesis 41:46 *And Joseph was thirty years old when he stood before Pharaoh king of Egypt. And Joseph went out from the presence of Pharaoh, and went throughout all the land*

not able to get professional interpreters of their dreams and therefore could not know the meaning of their dreams. On hearing this, Joseph comforted them by declaring that the interpretation of dreams came from God alone. This unhesitating declaration by Joseph shows that his faith and loyalty in the LORD God were securely intact. Joseph requested them to tell him their dreams. Joseph made two points: that the meaning of dreams lay with God and not with “wise men and magicians”; and by implication, that God had given him the gift of interpreting dreams.

It is certain that the source of the dreams of the butler and baker was God. We see that in the Old Testament, sometimes a dream is the means by which God would communicate with a person. But it must be cautioned that we should not give any importance to our dreams in the same vein as Joseph's response to the dreams of the two men. The writer to the Hebrews declares that in the past God spoke in various ways to the *fathers and prophets*, but *in these last days* has spoken to us by the Lord Jesus

Christ (Hebrews 1:1, 2).<sup>3</sup> And if there are some people who claim that they have a word from God through their dreams, their claims must be tested in the light of Scripture. We need to test their claims against the truths, which are taught in Scripture (Deuteronomy 13:1-5).<sup>4</sup> One more test is the moral influence they bring to bear—do they turn people to God or to something else.<sup>5</sup> We should also heed the words of Solomon in his wisdom literature (Ecclesiastes 5:7): *For in the multitude of dreams and many words, there are also divers*

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<sup>3</sup> Hebrews 1:1-2 *God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds;*

<sup>4</sup> Deuteronomy 13:1 *If there arise among you a prophet, or a dreamer of dreams, and giveth thee a sign or a wonder, 2 And the sign or the wonder come to pass, whereof he spake unto thee, saying, Let us go after other gods, which thou hast not known, and let us serve them; 3 Thou shalt not hearken unto the words of that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams: for the LORD your God proveth you, to know whether ye love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. 4 Ye shall walk after the LORD your God, and fear him, and keep his commandments, and obey his voice, and ye shall serve him, and cleave unto him. 5 And that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams, shall be put to death; because he hath spoken to turn you away from the LORD your God, which brought you out of the land of Egypt, and redeemed you out of the house of bondage, to thrust thee out of the way which the LORD thy God commanded thee to walk in. So shalt thou put the evil away from the midst of thee.*

<sup>5</sup> Baldwin, p.170.

*vanities* (futility or emptiness): *but fear God*. We should apply these tests to those who claim to have divine knowledge.

The important thing to note is that Joseph was there offering to interpret the dreams of the butler and the baker (v.8b). Joseph had dreamt and interpreted his own dreams. He had believed that God had revealed to him what would happen in the future concerning the destiny of himself and his family. Thus far we have seen that Joseph did not waver from this conviction and faith in God that one day his dreams would be fulfilled but at the moment the situation seemed remote. He still hoped and trusted in God in spite of the downward experiences in his life—each succeeding event brought him farther down and not up. He knew that he had this gift of interpreting dreams although he could see that his own dreams had not been realised or did not seem to be close to fulfilment. That speaks a lot about his steadfast faith and trust in God! What an example of faith, trust and hope in God!

### **Joseph Interprets the Butler's Dream**

The butler related his dream to Joseph. In his dream there was a

vine which had three branches. The vine budded, blossomed, and ripened. He then pressed them into Pharaoh's cup and gave it to him. Observe that Joseph was so sure of the fulfilment of the dream. God had given Joseph to discern the interpretation of the dream. Note the number three – three branches, three verbs, and Pharaoh's cup was mentioned three times (v.11). Joseph interpreted that in three days' time, Pharaoh would restore his position as his butler just as before (v.13). Confident of the fulfilment of his interpretation of the butler's dream, Joseph seized the opportunity to ask him for a favour. Joseph implored him to show kindness by interceding on his behalf before Pharaoh so that he could be set free from prison for he had done nothing to deserve the imprisonment (vv.14, 15).

A beautiful part of Joseph's character is seen in his plea for freedom to the butler. Observe that he did not relate in detail how he landed in prison. He did not mention about his brothers' evil deeds, neither did he mention about the seductive attack on Potiphar's wife and the reason why he was imprisoned. His main concern was

to be freed from prison, where he was unjustly confined. Joseph considered it unnecessary to tell all the details. He was longsuffering and forgiving towards those who mistreated and injured him. What an example for us; quite often we say more than necessary in such matters!

### **Joseph interprets the Baker's Dream**

After hearing the favourable interpretation by Joseph of the butler's dream, the baker related his dream to Joseph. A common similarity of the two dreams is the number "three." And in both instances, the number three represents three days. In three days' time, Pharaoh shall *lift up thy head from off thee; and shall hang thee on a tree* (v.19).

Some have criticised Joseph for lack of compassion and tact when he told the baker what would happen to him. On the other hand, would you not be surprised if Joseph had tampered with the interpretation and given the baker a more positive report? But that would be giving him a false hope and being dishonest. And what would be worse is that he would be a false "prophet". No, Joseph handled the interpretation with the same care and

accuracy as he had done to the butler. It was not for him to add or subtract what God had specially and specifically revealed to him. This is how we ought to handle the Word of God today—to tell plainly without tampering or changing the Word of God when we preach or teach it to others. God has already warned that there would be dire consequences upon those who tamper with His Word. Here is what God says to all those who handle His Word (Deuteronomy 4:2): *Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it, that ye may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you.* Then God inspired the last Apostle John to declare these words concerning His prophecy (Revelation 22:18-19): *For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.*

Joseph did exactly what God expected him to do—neither added nor subtracted any part of the prophecy, which God had revealed, to him. How important it is for every Christian to study the Word of God diligently and when we handle it to be approved of God. We need to heed the injunction of Paul in his second epistle to young Timothy (2:15): *Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.* And when we know the truth, we must without fear and favour of man be like Paul, who exhorted the Corinthian Christians (2 Corinthians 4:2): *But have renounced the hidden things of dishonesty, not walking in craftiness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully; but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.*

Joseph told the baker in the way, which was approved of God. He was plain honest and pulled no punches. That is the right way; what else, call a spade a spade!

### Joseph's Interpretation of the Dreams Comes True

And it happened just as Joseph interpreted the dreams. On the third day which was Pharaoh's birthday, he celebrated by holding a banquet to all his servants. Apart from throwing a feast to all his servants, Pharaoh would also grant amnesties if he was so minded. The butler was restored to his former position whereas the baker was hanged. But the chapter ends with a sad note. The butler forgot about Joseph's request to him. Imagine when Joseph saw the butler leaving the prison walls, he hoped that he too would soon be released! But the butler did not remember him. How ungrateful he was. We are not told why he forgot Joseph so soon. The Hebrew verb-form *forgat* (v.23) suggests that it could have been an accidental forgetting. The thought of Joseph's words asking him to remember him when he was restored to his former position must have kept recurring in his mind. But he might have put it off waiting for a more convenient time. Another reason might be that he was an ungrateful man. In this case, he was guilty of deliberately forgetting Joseph.

The fact that the Word of God recorded this attitude of the butler means that God does not want His children to be like the butler. Christians must not have an attitude of ingratitude towards others, who have been kind to them. Did not our Lord Jesus Christ ask the Samaritan leper, *Were there not ten cleansed? but where are the nine?*<sup>6</sup> How have we shown our gratefulness to the Lord Jesus Christ? He had given all for us? How much have we given Him?

### *PRACTICAL VALUE*

Christians are bought with the precious blood of the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>7</sup> We belong to God. We are His children. He will providentially care for us. We can be sure of that. Nothing therefore happens to a child of God by chance. Like Joseph, who was forgotten by the butler, we need to endure such disappointments and tribulations calmly and trusting our LORD. They are meant for our good. On our part we need to

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<sup>6</sup> Luke 17:17 *And Jesus answering said, Were there not ten cleansed? but where are the nine?*

<sup>7</sup> Acts 20:28 *Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.*

1 Corinthians 7:23 *Ye are bought with a price; be not ye the servants of men.*

examine ourselves with the aid of Scripture to find out what God is teaching or training us. If we are humble and submissive to His will, the eventual end will always be good and beneficial, in fact more than we can expect.<sup>8</sup>

We should not allow bitterness to set in our hearts because someone has treated us unjustly. Neither should we become vindictive and seek to get even. In such circumstances, we need to be patient and remain faithful to the LORD. A period of waiting would allow time to mould our character. It is only in time of difficulties that the true colour of ourselves is revealed, and that opens the opportunity to change for the better. Corrie Ten-Boom says, “When you are dying, you see things from a different perspective than when you think you may live for a long time.”

Some view Joseph’s earnest request to the butler to put a good word for him to Pharaoh so that he could be released was an indication of the waning or weakness of his faith in the LORD. If that were so,

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<sup>8</sup> Romans 8:28 *And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.*

then he would not have asked the butler for the favour. Joseph was quick to see an opportunity, which was opened to him to get himself freed. While he trusted God that one day he would be vindicated, he saw an opening to prove his innocence. Why let this golden opportunity pass away? He did not engineer the circumstances. It happened to him. He recognised that God was giving him the chance to appeal his innocence. There is a fine balance between the providence of God and the responsibility of man. Joseph sets the example how we can exercise our responsibility in similar situations.

AMEN.