

GENESIS—WEEK 31

JOSEPH HITS BOTTOM



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Cover Picture is Joseph, the Butler and the Baker by Benjamin Gerritsz. Cuyt (1612–1652) On display at Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

Joseph gets sold into slavery in Egypt, and everything goes downhill from there. He’s righteous—too righteous—and gets tossed into prison unjustly. His godliness is apparent to all, but he just can’t seem to catch a break.

But the darkest hour is just before the dawn.

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Thank you.

Genesis 39:1–41:8 — Joseph Hits Bottom
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1 Genesis 39:1–10 (ESV)

Now Joseph had been brought down to Egypt, and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, had bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there. The LORD was with Joseph, and he became a successful man, and he was in the house of his Egyptian master. His master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD caused all that he did to succeed in his hands. So Joseph found favor in his sight and attended him, and he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had. From the time that he made him overseer in his house and over all that he had, the LORD blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; the blessing of the LORD was on all that he had, in house and field. So he left all that he had in Joseph's charge, and because of him he had no concern about anything but the food he ate.

Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance. And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, "Lie with me." But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Behold, because of me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my charge. He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except you, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" And as she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not listen to her, to lie beside her or to be with her.

Potiphar made Joseph, a slave, the “overseer in his house and over all that he had.” That means that Joseph had command over non-slaves. To an American, this doesn’t make sense. When we think of slavery, we picture a brutal institution in which slaves have no possibility of high position.

Ancient slavery was different. There wasn’t much difference between slavery and serfdom back then. In ancient Egypt, unless you were the Pharaoh, someone else was your lord. No one was completely free.

<http://www.touregypt.net/featurestories/slaves.htm>

This definition of slavery enabled Joseph’s rise to power. Many people had power over other people, but the smart ones made shrewd use of whoever was useful.

Joseph’s “usefulness” came in handy.

Joseph was useful, not because he was clever, but because God was with him. We are useful too—when we depend on God and not on ourselves. That’s easier said than done, though. We are taught to be self-reliant. That’s what growing up and moving out of your parents’ house is all about.

One of the tricky areas—at least for me—is prayer. I sometimes rush through my prayers as if I’m reciting a memorized grace before dinner. I rarely just scream, “I don’t even know what to pray for!”

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. — Romans 8:26 (ESV)

Do you have something you don’t pray for because you don’t know what to say? Don’t let that stop you.

2 Genesis 39:11–23 (ESV)

But one day, when he went into the house to do his work and none of the men of the house was there in the house, she caught him by his garment, saying, “Lie with me.” But he left his garment in her hand and fled and got out of the house. And as soon as she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled out of the house, she called to the men of her household and said to them, “See, he has brought among us a Hebrew to laugh at us. He came in to me to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice. And as soon as he heard that I lifted up my voice and cried out, he left his garment beside me and fled and got out of the house.” Then she laid up his garment by her until his master came home, and she told him the same story, saying, “The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought among us, came in to me to laugh at me. But as soon as I lifted up my voice and cried, he left his garment beside me and fled out of the house.”

As soon as his master heard the words that his wife spoke to him, “This is the way your servant treated me,” his anger was kindled. And Joseph's master took him and put him into the prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined, and he was there in prison. But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison. And the keeper of the prison put Joseph in charge of all the prisoners who were in the prison. Whatever was done there, he was the one who did it. The keeper of the prison paid no attention to anything that was in Joseph's charge, because the LORD was with him. And whatever he did, the LORD made it succeed.

This passage is notable for what it doesn't say. It doesn't say that Joseph was depressed—or even sad. This is a study in faith conquering adversity.

Imagine just how much cause Joseph has to be depressed, or even to doubt God. He's done nothing wrong, and yet evil people with evil intentions have made him a slave—and now a slave in prison for a crime he didn't commit. How can a just and loving God allow that?

It's easy for us to see the purpose in all this; we know the ending. But Joseph doesn't, and he's right in the middle of the stink and the pain and the doubt. What's keeping him afloat? Obviously Joseph can't know how this is all going to work out, but he knows something. What?

The text tells us, repeatedly, that the LORD was with Joseph. The reason this was so helpful to Joseph is simple—he paid attention. God hadn't bailed Joseph out of his situation (yet) but He had shown him that he wasn't alone.

And Joseph noticed.

Joseph's faith was rock-solid because he knew that God had not abandoned him. God was there and, since He's God, in control. That gave Joseph comfort when all else was uncomfortable.

One of the main functions of a church is to uplift people who are struggling. Just being there for someone is bracing. It's a big boost when they see that God and His servants are not absent.

3 Genesis 40:1–8 (ESV)

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.

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.”

There’s something amazingly arrogant about what Joseph does here. He is obviously beneath the other two prisoners. Other translations say he “attended” them or he “served” them.

But when they’re troubled by their dreams Joseph says, “*Do not interpretations belong to God? Please tell them to me.*” The word Joseph uses for God here is “Elohim” (El-o-HEEM). This is God with a capital G, the one and only creator of the universe.

But they’re in a land with a polytheistic state religion that venerates the Pharaoh as a god. Not only is Joseph defying that, but he’s claiming some kind of special connection to the real God when he says, “*Please tell them to me.*” He doesn’t say to pray to Elohim or to ask Elohim to reveal the meaning. No, since all interpretations belong to Elohim, just tell your dreams to Joseph.

Well, it isn’t bragging if you can do it. He knows his gifts, and he’s using them wisely.

He’s making a bold move to get out of there.

One of the key tasks of a Christian is figuring out how to best serve God. You can’t do everything; you have to choose. This gets tricky because everyone has natural talents, but God gifts us in unexpected ways. How do you know what God is calling you to?

I don’t have the answer. There are many good books on the subject. I like *Knowing God’s Will* by Blaine Smith.

But one thing I do know—you shouldn’t sit around waiting for the perfect answer. Just start doing something, and be ready to adjust as the LORD leads.

You learn from doing something, even mistakes.

Especially mistakes.

4 Genesis 40:9–23 (ESV)

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.”

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.”

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.

Dream interpretation was a big deal in ancient Egypt, and Joseph's skill is precious.

<http://www.touregypt.net/featurestories/dream.htm>

Joseph knows this. It looks like he's found his “get out of jail free” card. Everything goes exactly according to plan, and Joseph may be expecting to be sprung any minute now.

But that's not God's timing. More importantly, even if the cupbearer had remembered Joseph's dream interpretations, no one would have cared. It may not look like it at the time, but it's providential that “*the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him.*”

He'll remember when the time is right.

It's easy to say, “God's timing isn't our timing.” It's not so easy to be patient while suffering endures. Sometimes sound doctrine distracts from the right attitude. Instead of just praying for the suffering, ask for a more caring heart. We need to grieve along with those who are in pain.

Don't get me wrong here—never stop praying for the suffering—but ministry flows from our growth.

Pray that God will mold us into the kind of servants who can really comfort the hurting.

5 Genesis 41:1–8 (ESV)

After two whole years, Pharaoh dreamed that he was standing by the Nile, and behold, there came up out of the Nile seven cows attractive and plump, and they fed in the reed grass. And behold, seven other cows, ugly and thin, came up out of the Nile after them, and stood by the other cows on the bank of the Nile. And the ugly, thin cows ate up the seven attractive, plump cows. And Pharaoh awoke. And he fell asleep and dreamed a second time. And behold, seven ears of grain, plump and good, were growing on one stalk. And behold, after them sprouted seven ears, thin and blighted by the east wind. And the thin ears swallowed up the seven plump, full ears. And Pharaoh awoke, and behold, it was a dream. So in the morning his spirit was troubled, and he sent and called for all the magicians of Egypt and all its wise men. Pharaoh told them his dreams, but there was none who could interpret them to Pharaoh.

Joseph has been in prison *two whole years*. The New Kings James says, “*At the end of two full years,*” which is closer to what the Hebrew literally says. This clarification is necessary because of an important Hebrew idiom. If the text had just said, “*two years,*” it could have just been parts of two calendar years – possibly a couple of months. But two whole years means 24 months—a long time to wait in a “pit” with absolutely zero progress towards one’s destiny. God disciplines his servants!

This Hebrew idiom is also important for another reason. It’s the key to understanding Matthew 12:40 and Mark 9:31.

For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. — Matthew 12:40

for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise.” — Mark 9:31

Friday afternoon to Sunday before dawn is about a day and a half—nowhere close to three days and three nights (using literal English).

But back then, “days and nights” was just a reference to calendar days, with each day starting at sundown. Jesus died Friday afternoon and rose early on the first day of the week—Sunday.

That’s “*three days and three nights*” to a first century Jew.

The Bible doesn’t detail Joseph’s two year stint in prison. It doesn’t say what happened or what he learned. It merely says it was *two whole years*. This highlights Joseph’s suffering. It was a lot—beyond what most of us can imagine. The point is that God’s agenda is the absolute priority. Two years of suffering is a lot but, hey, whatever it takes.

The cross is another example of “whatever it takes.” Jesus’ suffering is beyond our imagination, but pain avoidance just isn’t God’s thing, even for Himself. It’s puzzling sometimes, but glorious always.

Praise God for His ways.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. What keeps you from praying?
2. When have you been helped by someone just not abandoning you?
3. What has helped you figure out your calling?
4. How do you best help someone who is grieving?
5. Have you seen suffering prove useful?