

When Dreams of Freedom Don't Come True

Genesis 40

There are many 'prisons' in life, often hidden from view. Spiritual prisons are worse than physical ones. We cry out for God to deliver us, but sometimes it seems He has forgotten us. God doesn't do that. He'll never forsake you. As you dream, *never stop trusting in God!*

Dreams of Freedom...Forgotten by God?

- *Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker join Joseph in custody (1-4)*
- *Joseph interprets dreams of his fellow-inmates (5-19)*
- *Joseph's predictions come true, but he is forgotten (20-23)*

Lessons for Life When We Feel Forgotten

- *Discouragement results when we face unjust persecution.*
- *God gives opportunities to show faith in times of trial.*
- *God won't forget you: Seek His approval, not that of others.*



Joni Eareckson was an athletic and vivacious teenager when her life was suddenly changed. In a moment a broken neck ambushed her life. Locked in a prison of paralysis, she sunk into a dungeon of despair, and told her sister to leave her alone: *Just close the drapes, turn out the lights, and shut the door.*

When things don't turn out the way we expect, and God seems to have forgotten us, we do anything we can to manage. That's what Joni did. She writes, *Like jugglers spinning plates on long sticks, we try to manage. When we feel utterly overwhelmed, we try soaking in the tub, sweating on the treadmill, splurging on a new dress, or heading to the mountains for the weekend. We smile and say we are trusting God, but deep down we know it's a lie... That's how I felt. But after weeks in bed, I got tired of being depressed, and I finally cried out, "God, if I can't die, please show me how to live." It was just the prayer God was waiting for.*

Have you ever felt that God is wasting your life with inexplicable waiting? He has put a dream in your heart – for your future, your family, your finances, maybe for a ministry, and now you're ready to move – or are you? Inexplicably, God seems to disappear, and you are left in a holding pattern. You wonder what He's up to, as you are stuck in neutral.

We do not know the future. When we're living in a 'prison,' we long to know how or when we're going to get out, to 'see' what God is doing as the seemingly endless captivity goes on. We look at the 'four walls' of our gloom, we see the 'bars' of our helpless and hopeless

condition, and don't know what's coming. We're out of a job and have no prospects, and wonder when it'll change. Our marriage is floundering, and we wonder when we'll know intimacy again. Our children forsake God and His plans for life, and we wonder if they'll ever come back to Him. And all this *not knowing* can be killing us.

In this condition, there are two truths woven through the whole of Scripture to never forget. First, Satan does not know the future. Second, God does.

Satan can mess with your present – get you down and depressed, anxious and bitter, steal your hope...but he doesn't know what tomorrow will bring. We've seen this all through Genesis, as Satan does all he can to destroy humanity and promote rebellion against God, yet over and over again, God surprises Satan by turning *his* schemes into an opportunity for God to show His forgiveness and grace! The greatest story in history, the story of God sending His Son shows this too. Satan had *no idea* what God was doing when Jesus was born. The idea that He would die for our sins never entered his mind. That's why he aroused the hatred of the Jews against Him, so that they shouted "Crucify Him!" Satan was totally blindsided when Jesus rose from the dead. What he thought was his ultimate victory turned into his greatest defeat. Scripture tells us that if Satan and his demons had known God's plan, he would have never crucified the Lord of glory (1 Cor 2.8).

But listen: God knows the future. Better yet, He knows what your future *can be*, if you'll just walk with Him. Why? Because He has made a commitment: "I will never

leave you, or forsake you" (Heb 13.5)! When you can't see your way ahead, God is the one you can trust. Do you believe that?

This morning we are looking at Genesis 40, and in case you aren't aware of the story to this point, our hero – Joseph – has been sold into slavery in Egypt, then falsely accused of sexual assault, and thrown in prison. I think we can all agree these events might test Joseph's faith! But then, God gives him a glimmer of hope.

Dreams of Freedom...Forgotten by God?

- *Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker join Joseph in custody (1-4)*

Genesis 40.1-4 tell us that after Joseph had been in prison for some time, two new inmates arrived, the cupbearer and the baker of Pharaoh, king of Egypt. We don't know what they did, but he was angry enough to have them put in prison. While they are there awaiting their fate, Joseph has been made the 'inmate in charge' of the prison, so he has charge over them.

- *Joseph interprets dreams of his fellow-inmates (5-19)*

Then, for a second time in Joseph's life, dreams play a pivotal role – only this time it isn't his dreams, but the dreams of the cupbearer and the baker. Both have dreams on the same night – dreams so vivid that they remember them in the morning. When Joseph does his morning rounds, he finds both men are dejected. Let's pick up the story in Gen. 40.8-13:

Then they said to him, “We have had a dream and there is no one to interpret it.” Then Joseph said to them, “Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell it to me, please.” So the chief cupbearer told his dream to Joseph, and said to him, “In my dream, behold, there was a vine in front of me; and on the vine were three branches. And as it was budding, its blossoms came out, and its clusters produced ripe grapes. Now Pharaoh’s cup was in my hand; so I took the grapes and squeezed them into Pharaoh’s cup, and I put the cup into Pharaoh’s hand.” Then Joseph said to him, “This is the interpretation of it: the three branches are three days; within three more days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your office; and you will put Pharaoh’s cup into his hand according to your former custom when you were his cupbearer.”

Wow! Talk about good news! This fellow has offended Pharaoh, and figures his life is over – only to be told that he is going to be restored to his original position! This is great news! But the moment isn’t lost on Joseph: After all, he’s dreamed of freedom for years. Perhaps this is his chance! He doesn’t want to miss it. Look at vv14-15:

“Only keep me in mind when it goes well with you, and please do me a kindness by mentioning me to Pharaoh and get me out of this house. For I was in fact kidnapped from the land of the Hebrews, and even here I have done nothing that they should have put me into the dungeon.”

You can hear the desperation in his voice: *You’re going to be free. Remember me! I’ve done nothing wrong, and I’m stuck in this dungeon!*

The baker hears the cupbearers good news, and tells his dream to Joseph: He had three baskets of bread on his head, and the birds were eating the bread out of the top basket that were for Pharaoh. The meaning of his dream was *not good*: In three days he would be put to death and the birds would eat his flesh.

- *Joseph’s predictions come true, but he is forgotten (20-23)*

The ‘epilogue’ to the dreams narrative is in the last four verses of Genesis 40 (20-23):

Thus it came about 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 cupbearer and the head of the chief baker among his servants. He restored the chief cupbearer to his office, and he put the cup into Pharaoh’s hand; but he hanged the chief baker, just as Joseph had interpreted to them. Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him.

That final sentence is a painful one. Joseph has shown his faith in God, and God has shown His power in Joseph’s prison dungeon. Think of how Joseph felt when God gave him the interpretation of the two dreams: *God is here with me! He hasn’t forgotten me! He’s ready to use me! This is what I’ve been waiting for!*

If you take a peek ahead to the first verse of Genesis 41, you read these words: *Now it happened at the end of two full years...* The cupbearer forgot Joseph, and it seemed to Joseph that God had forgotten him, too.

Have you ever felt forgotten by God? Joni Eareckson felt that way after she was paralyzed. She escaped her prison of despair when she reached out to God. For me it wasn't paralysis, but I have been there, too. It may not have been so dramatic in your life, but when circumstances pile up, the enemy will always whisper. "God has forgotten you." When that happens, you need to have a point of reference to keep on track. Joseph is that point of reference. What lessons for life can we learn from Joseph's experience?

Lessons for Life When We Feel Forgotten

- *Discouragement results when we face unjust persecution.*

We Christians don't do well with discouragement. Like the 'entitlement world' in which we live, we've come to expect that God is supposed to fix things for us. 'Health and wealth' tele-hucksters have seduced a generation of Christians into thinking they're supposed to be happy all the time.

In his book *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy*, author Mark Vroegop tells of his experience after his daughter Sylvia was born dead. He and his wife grieved, but they found that when they shared their sorrow with other Christians, they were always trying to find the 'bright side,' or they just changed the subject. Then he writes this:

When people stayed in the conversation, they often responded in unhelpful ways. In moments of attempted comfort, people said things like "I'm sure the Lord will give you another baby," "Maybe more people will come to faith because of the death of your daughter," or "The

Lord must know He can trust you with this." Vroegop then writes: *It became clear that most people did not know how to join us in our grief.*

Scripture never suggests that we're supposed to be happy all the time. In fact, it tells us to *weep with those who weep* (Rom 12.15). All through the Psalms, godly David weeps, cries out to God in sorrow, and grieves. Have you ever done that? This isn't heaven – that's coming one day soon! – and on *that day* God will wipe away every tear from our eyes (Rev 21.4), but until then, share your grief with the Lord.

I won't go into details, but my first year in seminary was a tough one for me. My self-confidence was at an all-time low – a broken engagement, a paralyzing fear of public speaking, no confidence in my academic ability, and socially introverted. (I know, you're thinking, what's changed?!) On top of this, I had a roommate who didn't give me any encouragement, and I spent all my money on the first semester's tuition, with no idea where the next was coming from. I started doing something I'd never done before: I started sharing my woes with God. I would bury my face in an overstuffed chair in our apartment living room after my roommate went to bed, and weep, and tell God my problems, my fears, my hopes. I could never catalogue the things that happened in my life that began to change me and my circumstances, but I know this: Those times changed me. God met me there.

Joseph grieved in prison. He wanted out, and waited for years for God to deliver him. He faced his discouragement without abandoning the Lord.

Is life getting you down? Then embrace your struggle, and share it with the Lord. He hasn't forgotten you.

- *God gives opportunities to show faith in times of trial.*

Even though it didn't result in him getting out of prison (for another two years), God provided Joseph with an opportunity to show his faith – by interpreting the dreams of his fellow inmates.

This is significant – it's one way God provides for us while we're discouraged: He gives us ministry in other's lives. It gets our eyes off ourselves, and helping others. Joseph was still stuck in prison, but he was reminded that God was with him by showing his faith to others.

- *God won't forget you: Seek His approval, not that of others.*

When Joseph was in his prison in Egypt, when it seemed he had been forgotten, God had not forgotten him. His life was still 'under construction' – and God, as we shall see next week, used the two years he was left languishing in prison to prepare him to become a great leader.

Others may forget your good deeds, just as the cupbearer forgot Joseph. But Joseph could take solace in the fact that God had given him wisdom to interpret the dreams, and although his imprisonment continued (and would for two more years; 41.1), he knew that God had not forgotten him.

Digging Deeper

1. The story of Joseph interpreting the dreams of Pharaoh's baker and butler recounted in Genesis 40 is well-known – it's a staple of Sunday School curriculum! We usually focus on God giving Joseph the meaning of his fellow-inmates' dreams, but behind this divine provision lies a discouraging reality: Joseph longs to be free, and while he successfully predicts the fate of others, he cannot see his own! The narrator invites us to consider what he was going through: What doubts might Joseph have had during his years in custody? Be creative! What might his 'discussions' with God have sounded like?
2. We sometimes view Old Testament characters like Joseph as if they were spiritual 'super-heroes' – as though they never battled with discouragement or depression, but this is not true. Biblical 'all-stars' like Samuel, David, Elijah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Jonah, John the Baptist, Peter, and Paul (to name a few) suffered with discouragement; Joseph is no different. What emotions do you 'hear' in Joseph's words to the cupbearer in Gen. 40.14-15?
3. God 'gifted' Joseph with an ability to interpret dreams; it was an evidence of God working in him, and every time he used it, it exhibited his faith in God (even though it didn't always turn out well!). Although Joseph is imprisoned in Gen. 40, he uses his ability to help fellow prisoners. What spiritual gift(s) do you have? Do you use your special spiritual abilities, whether you feel like it or not? What about when you're facing trials?
4. After Joseph interpreted the cupbearer's dream, he asked him to mention him to Pharaoh, but the guy forgot (40.23), and Joseph languished in prison for another two years (40.1). How do you think he feels *now*?! He knows God is with him (he interpreted the dreams), but why doesn't God get him out of prison? Have you ever wondered why God doesn't answer your prayers, only to discover later that God was working in your life during that time? What lessons has God taught you in your 'prison times' that you would never have learned any other way? What was God preparing you for in those difficult days?