

Chapter 5: Do Not Interpretations Belong to God?

Genesis 40:1–23

Trials expose the the genuineness of our trust in the Lord. We cannot trust the Lord in theory only. Either we trust him, or we do not. Trials, then, test whether we trust him. More than testing, though, trials also build our trust in the Lord—especially when the trials stretch longer than we think we can bear them. When the Lord does not work as quickly as we wish he would, he does so at least partially to expand our trust in him, so that we patiently wait for him to accomplish his work in his way. As John Calvin writes about Joseph, “Thus, when [the Lord] might have delivered the holy man directly from prison, he chose to lead him around by circuitous paths, the better to prove his patience, and to manifest, by the mode of his deliverance, that he has wonderful methods of working, hidden from our view. He does this that we may learn not to measure, by our own sense, the salvation which he has promised us; but that we may suffer ourselves to be turned hither or thither by his hand, until he shall have performed his work.”¹ As we still wrestle with how to make sense of our own lives, this passage teaches us that *interpretations belong to God*.

God Interprets our Circumstances (Gen. 40:1–8)

While we know that Joseph is in prison for a long time, we do not know how long he must suffer there. Joseph has been in prison already for some indefinitely period of time that the text identifies only as taking place “after these things” (v. 1; my translation). The only details we have to help us orient ourselves to the passing of time in the Joseph story are the details that Joseph was seventeen years old when he began to provoke the hatred of his brothers (Gen. 37:2), and that he becomes ruler of Egypt at age thirty (Gen. 41:46). Then, between where we find Joseph in Genesis 40 and his rise to serve Pharaoh, there will be another two years of waiting (Gen. 41:1).² So, Joseph is twenty-eight years old in Genesis 40, having languished in Egypt for eleven years so far; however, we do not know how many of these years were in the service of Potiphar, and how many were spent in the prison.

The story of Genesis 40, then, opens with the statement that the king’s cupbearer and baker had “committed an offense against their lord the king of Egypt” (v. 1). The narrator omits any details about their offenses, probably since such information would be unimportant and a distraction from the main storyline, in their interactions with Joseph.³ Nevertheless, the phrase “committed an offense” is more literally translated as “sinned,” using the same word that Joseph had spoken back in Genesis 39:9: “How then can I do this great wickedness and *sin* against God?” Joseph may be

¹ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:306.

² Mathews, *Genesis 11*, 1B:746.

³ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 475.

numbered among the transgressors, but this specific word for the officers’ “sin” reminds us that Joseph is, unlike them, innocent.⁴

As royal officers, they are imprisoned with Joseph in the place “where the king’s prisoners were confined” (Gen. 39:20). Furthermore, we discover that they were put under the custody of “the captain of the guard” (v. 3, 4). While the captain of the guard is not named, we should remember that we already know the captain of the guard: Potiphar (Gen. 37:36; 39:1). It is Potiphar, then, who appoints Joseph to “attend” them (v. 4). This is the same word used to describe the position of authority and influence that Potiphar had given Joseph over his house: “So Joseph found favor in [Potiphar’s] sight and *attended* him...” (Gen. 39:4).⁵ Still, it is one thing to attend a prominent official, and it is another thing to attend prisoners. Some see this role as demeaning to Joseph, while others see this in line with Joseph’s flourishing influence within the prison that we read about in Genesis 39:22–23.⁶ Regardless, this position puts Joseph in contact with these officials, and it will be his relationship with the cupbearer that will ultimately connect him to Pharaoh. This arrangement where Joseph attends these officers continues for “some time,” another indefinite period of time (v. 4).

The main story of this narrative begins when the cupbearer and the baker both have unique dreams on the same night (v. 5). We should see that these two dreams correspond to the two dreams that Joseph had in Genesis 37:5–10, as well as the two dreams that Pharaoh will have in Genesis 41:1–7.⁷ Providentially, when Joseph comes to attend them in the morning, their faces reflect something that they do not think to share with Joseph initially.⁸ Instead, Joseph asks them what is troubling them once he sees their troubled faces (v. 6; cf. Neh. 2:2).⁹ They explain that they are downcast not because of the dreams themselves, but because they have no one to help them to interpret the dreams. When they were in good standing in Pharaoh’s court, they would have had access to magicians and wise men who could have helped them to interpret their dreams, but in prison they are cut off from those resources (cf. Gen. 41:8). Victor Hamilton puts their dilemma well: “A dream without an accompanying interpretation is like a diagnosis without a prognosis.”¹⁰

This moment is more of a test for Joseph than we might recognize at first. The last time Joseph ventured into the territory of sharing or interpreting dreams, he had incurred the hatred of his brothers and the rebuke of his father (Gen. 37:8, 10). Has Joseph’s vast suffering over these past eleven years shaken his confidence in God?¹¹ Joseph’s confident faith responds reflexively: “Do not interpretations belong to God? Please tell them to me” (v. 8).¹² Joseph affirms that God can give interpretations for the dreams, and, by asking them to tell him their dream, he reflects that he

⁴ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 381–82.

⁵ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 475.

⁶ For the former position, see Kidner, *Genesis*, 204. For the latter position, see Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 475.

⁷ Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 629–30.

⁸ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:307.

⁹ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 382.

¹⁰ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 476.

¹¹ Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 633.

¹² Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 476.

believes that God will give the interpretation through him.¹³ Through everything he has suffered, Joseph has not stopped trusting God.

God Interprets our Circumstances by his Word (Gen. 40:9–19)

The chief cupbearer is the first to take up Joseph's offer, recounting his dream in v. 9–11. Wenham rightly observes that "Threes dominate this dream: three stems, three stages of growth, sprouting, blossoming, and ripening, and three actions by the cupbearer, taking grapes, squeezing them, and handing the wine to Pharaoh. The speed with which each stage is described may well suggest the imminence of the dream's fulfillment."¹⁴ Joseph responds with a favorable interpretation, explaining that in three days, Pharaoh will "lift his head" by restoring him to his former office (v. 13). To "lift up the head" of someone can refer to taking up their case, where the results may be favorable (Gen. 40:13, 21; 2 Kgs. 25:27; Jer. 52:31) or unfavorable (Gen. 40:22).¹⁵ After giving the interpretation, Joseph asks the cupbearer to remember mention his own case to Pharaoh. In one of the few places where we hear Joseph reflecting on his own situation, he explains, "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" (v. 15). Joseph is patient, but he is not passive.

The text tells us that the baker relates his own dream when he "sees" that the interpretation for the cupbearer had been favorable (v. 16). In this phrase, there may be a sense here that the baker is less motivated by discovering the truth, and more motivated to hear something favorable to him.¹⁶ In the baker's dreams, many of the details are similar, with three baskets, and with the stuff of his former occupation (in his case, bread). While the food was for Pharaoh, it is not Pharaoh who eats in this dream, but birds. Joseph interprets the dream as referring to the same time frame (three days), and with the same phrase, "lift up your head"; however, the baker's head will not be lifted to enjoy his former office, but to be executed in such a way that birds will feast on his corpse (cf. Deut. 21:22–23; Josh. 10:26).¹⁷ Joseph is faithful to relate the details of the dream, regardless of whether the interpretation is favorable or not.

God Interprets our Circumstances in his Timing (Gen. 40:20–23)

On the third day, the cupbearer and the baker receive precisely what Joseph had interpreted from their respective dreams. Pharaoh restored the cupbearer to his former office, but he hanged the chief baker (v. 22). To underscore the connection, the text adds this line to the end of v. 22: "as Joseph had interpreted to them." This was not a lucky guess, but a faithful interpretation, given to Joseph by God himself.

¹³ Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 633.

¹⁴ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 383.

¹⁵ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 479–80. In other cases, the phrase can mean "(1) count heads, i.e., take a census (e.g., Num 1:2; 4:2) or (2) act confidently (e.g., Judg 8:28; Ps 24:9)." (Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 383.)

¹⁶ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:310.

¹⁷ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 384.

Nevertheless, Joseph’s remarkable interpretation passes away without changing Joseph’s circumstances. In v. 23, the text redundantly tells us that the chief cupbearer “did not remember Joseph,” and also that he “forgot him.” The repetition of the cupbearer’s failure emphasizes how painful this must have been for Joseph. Joseph had an opportunity to get out of prison, but he must wait longer for God to work.¹⁸ This is now the third time that Joseph suffers for his faithfulness: first, for his faithfulness in sharing his own dreams (Gen. 37); then for his faithfulness to his master and to his God (Gen. 39); and now, for his faithfulness in giving correct interpretations to each man’s respective dream.¹⁹

Nevertheless, even now Joseph’s faith does not waver. Reflecting on this story, Allen Ross observes that “God tests his people’s faith in the promises before he entrusts them to positions of greater responsibilities.”²⁰ Joseph has been faithful at every moment of his life, even when that faithfulness cost him dearly. Now that Joseph has been faithful in difficult times, the Lord will raise him up to be faithful in the greatest difficulty he will face: the heavy seven years of famine that are coming. While everyone around Joseph is evil toward him, God is working Joseph’s story forward for good.

Discussion Questions

- 1) How long has Joseph suffered? How many people have been involved in causing his suffering? How close have those relationships been? How strong are Joseph’s prospects for deliverance as this passage begins? How has Joseph’s faith survived this long? What strategies do you have to fight for faith when trials and suffering pile up in your own life? How can Joseph’s story teach us about the virtue of persevering through deep, extended, multifaceted suffering?
- 2) Where would the cupbearer and baker have sought out interpretations for their dreams if they were not in prison (v. 8)? What makes Joseph confident that God will use him to give interpretations for their dreams? Does God still communicate prophetic insight through dreams (cf. Heb. 1:1–2)? If not, then how does God give “interpretations” for the circumstances of the lives of his people? Where do you seek out interpretations for the circumstances of your life?
- 3) How does the word of the Lord test Joseph again (cf. Ps. 105:19) at the end of this chapter? How much longer does Joseph have to wait for God’s word to be fulfilled (cf. Gen. 41:1)? What promise has God given to Joseph (cf. Gen. 37:5–9)? What promises has God made to us? How long must we wait for God to fulfill the promises that he has made to us? How does God use our trials both to test our faith and to work toward the eventual fulfillment of those promises?
- 4) How does Joseph’s ongoing descent deeper and deeper into “the pit” (v. 15) foreshadow the pattern of Christ’s life (cf. Phil. 2:6–8)? What does Joseph’s being “numbered among the transgressors” (Isa. 53:12; cf. Mark 15:28; Luke 22:37), with the cupbearer and the baker, suggest? What does the phrase “on the third day” (v. 20), albeit subtly (cf. 1 Cor. 15:4)? In these elements, what does the pattern of Joseph’s life suggest about the life and ministry of God’s Messiah?

¹⁸ Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 2:312–13.

¹⁹ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18 – 50*, 483.

²⁰ Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 635.