

You know that we're following the story of Joseph in the Bible, "Joseph Rags to Riches" we're on this week and the bible passage is that we're following in chapter 41, the verses are given there because if we read all 57 verses some of you might have fallen off your seat by the time we get the end, so I've selected verses that we're going to follow! Genesis chapter 41 starting at verse 8; this passage is entitled "Pharaoh's dreams". In the first 8 verses it's describing a fact the Pharaoh had some dreams and was really disturbed by them. So verse 8 says:

[Reading Genesis 41:8-24, 28-40, 53-57]

There we go.

We've looked at Joseph's life over the last few weeks, I think we've done two weeks already. So now we come to this this next stage in Joseph's life. Joseph's life has really been a roller coaster ride, hasn't it? At this point in the story at the end of this time he's about 30 years old (by the end of the story we've just read he's about 30 years old) but already he has gone from being a favourite son to being a slave and then to being chief steward in Potiphar's house, then to being a prisoner in a prison, but then also becoming the manager of that prison as the trusted prisoner within the prison, and it's all over yet: Joseph's life of ups and downs still continues. I believe we learn more. I've said this a number of times: I think we learn more about ourselves and about God in the trials and hardships of our lives than we do in the glorious times of success, and actually I think we grow more time through those times – we grow more as we feel the pain the difficulty of having to but up against things that we don't like and that do cause us to suffer, but if we are able to respond positively they actually help us to grow. Now please don't mishear me – I'm not saying that God brings bad things on us (God is a God of goodness) but in this world difficult times, hardships, trials will come, and I believe God uses them to refine us, to help us to be more like him and to learn that we have to rely on him. In the good times, of course, we can rely on ourselves. In the difficult times we have no one else to rely on other than God, and that's one of the main reasons that God is able to use those times to help grow in faith, and grow in who we are and how we choose to trust him.

Joseph illustrates this point in how he deals with being imprisoned. As well as running the prison himself, Joseph seems to be one of those guys that he doesn't mind extra responsibility: in any situation he just seems to float to the top and he finds himself in charge even in the prison when he's imprisoned. As well as managing the prison Joseph's ability to interpret dreams, the dreams given by God, also comes to the fore in this part of Joseph's life. Now remember, an interesting thing here is this is the same gift that Joseph had when he was a young, spoilt, arrogant, young man. He has dreams – perhaps he hadn't really honed the ability to interpret them, but he had a broad understanding. Those dreams he had as a young man, they're basically saying "I'm going to be lording it over you my brothers, and you Mum and Dad." And so he had that ability to interpret but he didn't have the character – he hadn't yet developed the character to be able to interpret them and to share that interpretation in a way that didn't cause offence but was actually humble, and ready to be shared in a way that doesn't get people's backs up. Tough times of heartache have made Joseph humble and also more ready to trust God even in those times of hardship.

So we have these two dreams (that we didn't read because that was another chapter and I thought one chapter is about as much as we can cope with), but I do just want to cover the fact

that we had the cup-bearer. Now the cup-bearer was a very very significant role in the court of the kings of the time because if anybody wanted to kill you they could put a bit of something in your drink and then you drink it, and they could poison you. I'm not sure whether the cup-bearer just bore the cup or whether he actually took a sip from it before he passed it over to you (obviously this was before coronavirus – you wouldn't be doing that today but back then I think it might have been that the cup-bearer took a sip so that if he fell down dead you thought to yourself: “I tell you what, I'm going to have a drink of water instead.”) The cup-bearer was a very very important position: very close and intimate with the Pharaoh because you were, obviously if he wanted his drink, there to make sure he got it and was safe drinking it. So we have these two men, they were both ex-servants of the Pharaoh, and this man is the cup-bearer and Joseph interpreted his dream faithfully: he would be restored to its position of trust in the court of the Pharaoh. That dream was probably not such a difficult one for Joseph to interpret – it's always nice to give people good news, isn't it?

I've felt that a little bit with Boris Johnson actually – I think he's a man that likes to give good news, but I feel as though he's struggled a bit sometimes when he's got bad to give, and he's sort of tries to, I don't know, dress-up difficult news; I mean this week it's been “we should all be back to something like normal by Christmas,” and then the scientists are saying “actually I don't think that's the way it's really going to go.” So I think sometimes our Prime Minister struggles a bit with giving bad news.

Well I wonder whether Joseph also struggled a bit with having to give bad news because the other person he gave an interpretation to was the baker. Now I can't interpret dreams, but when you hear these two dreams you do get the feeling that this dream of the baker's: it wasn't going to go well. He's got the bread on his head ([in picture] he looks like a baker who may have had plenty of his over bread over the years; but anyway we'll leave that to one side). He had the bread on his head and all these crows came down and started pecking the bread and it dropped all over the floor. And Joseph had this gift of interpretation, but as so often with a gift it can also sometimes be a curse, and I think it must have felt a bit like a curse when he had bad news to give to somebody. And so to this baker Joseph had to still be honest and faithful in giving the news. He wasn't able to say “Yeah, you'll be restored, but actually it just means that your bread's not going to be as good as it used to be.” He had to be honest and give this news even when it was going to cause great horror and fear. And the news that Joseph had to give was that within three days this Baker was going to be hanged – that is a tough piece of news to give somebody, and that was the news that Joseph had to give to the baker. I'm not quite sure what the baker was to do with that news once he had it, but that was the story we have in chapter 40 of Genesis.

So we have this interpretation of these two Dreams: within three days one was restored, within three days the other was hanged. The cup-bearer was asked by Joseph (the one who was restored to his position), Joseph said to him “when you're restored please, please remember me to Pharaoh”, basically “put in a good word for me.” But as so often happens once the cup-bearer was back in a position of comfort and of security he forgot about the tough times, and he forgot about those who had helped him in the tough times as well, and he forgot about Joseph in the prison. But, it takes a while but gradually God is working out his purposes through Joseph's life, and we're told at the beginning of chapter 41 that Joseph had to languish in the prison for another 2 years, another 2 years of faithfulness and hope and patience. I don't know about you, how patient would we be having to really really struggle with something as difficult as this for 2 years, believing that God had promised he was with him, and would vindicate him and bring him to a better place? Really hard, really tough!

But God's plan is starting to come together as we get to the stage when Pharaoh has his own dreams that he can't understand, and Pharaoh's disturbed by these dreams and he asks all of his own dream interpreters and they can't interpret these dreams. And it's then that, finally, the cup-bearer remembers: "I had a dream once; oh, Joseph interpreted it for me" and then says to the Pharaoh, at least with a bit of humility, "I am so sorry I have got the worst memory," and says to Pharaoh "there's a guy that was in prison with me who interpreted my dream." So Joseph then foretells this famine, this seven year famine that would follow the seven years of plenty. And of course it's so easy in the years of plenty to simply to enjoy them. But this warning was: get ready because after the seven years when everything seems to be fine, there will be seven years when there is not enough – so get ready in the seven years of plenty.

So we find that this stage in the roller-coaster of Joseph's life means that he goes from being a prisoner to being Prime Minister, basically, of Egypt, second only to the Pharaoh. And it's interesting, isn't it, that this pagan ruler, the Pharaoh, recognises God at work in the life of Joseph – he has wisdom enough to recognise God at work through this man, this Hebrew, Joseph. And he appoints him to administer the relief work, and Egypt's preparations for those years of famine that were to come. So just like Potiphar – Potiphar did the same thing – he saw that Joseph was a man of integrity that God was working through, and in a similar way here the Pharaoh sees Joseph to be a man of integrity who was guided by God. And Joseph acts decisively; he recruits commissioners to go around the country identifying how much grain has been grown in every area and how much to put away, and it was one fifth of the grain each year that was put away to be able to cover those seven years of famine that were coming. And he built storehouses, massive storehouses, for the grain. Because Joseph trusted God and acted on what God had shown him a whole nation was saying from starvation.

At the end of chapter 41, it would seem as though Joseph had everything. We're told in those last few verses that Joseph now had an important job: Prime Minister of Egypt. He had great status therefore he had great wealth. He had a new name, a new Egyptian name which actually we can't interpret, we don't know what that name means. He had an Egyptian wife and he had two sons born to him. But it's interesting the names of the two sons are quite significant and I want to finish just by recognising and looking at these names for a moment or two.

The first son's name was Manasseh, which of course became the name of one of the tribes of Israel; Manasseh means "to forget", and he says "I name my first son Manasseh, because God has made me forget all my trouble and my father's household." Now that to me sounds more like a desire to forget, than an actual forgetting; you don't forget troubles and hardship by saying "Nah, it's all behind me now, I never think about it." It doesn't really work like that, and I think the fact that he chose to call his first-born son "I forget" is a sign that actually Joseph was still carrying great pain from his life, particularly from the way that his family, his brothers had treated him.

The second son that he had was called Ephraim (once again I think there was one of the tribes called Ephraim), and Ephraim means "Twice fruitful", and in a sense it was simply a reference to the fact that this is my second-born son, I've had my first son and my wife has now born me a second son so (it was him, but really his wife as well) we are twice fruitful. But also, God has made me fruitful, twice fruitful, in the land of my suffering. A recognition again that this is a place Joseph was not born here, he was born elsewhere, and he was forced to come to this land and, yes, he's been fruitful but this has also been a place of great suffering and hardship for him.

Joseph wants to forget, and he wants to be whole, and he wants to enjoy the good things of this life that he has in Egypt, but I think the reality is that the pain and the hurt that he has gone

through are still with him, and the past still haunts him.

Next week we're going to see how God helps to bring healing and restoration to Joseph's story and Joseph's life, as to the relationships that have been torn apart so painfully God brings healing and renewal. Let's pray together.

Lord Jesus we thank you for this continuing story of the life of Joseph. We thank you for the challenge that it brings to us today. We thank you that through the troubles of our life we can turn to you. We pray that when we have troubles, when we have hardships and difficulties that we will turn to you and throw ourselves on you recognising we can't do this on our own and that you, Lord, will bring us through. We believe and trust that you will bring us through. We pray, Lord, for those times when we seek to forget difficulties and troubles that have happened to us, brushed them under the carpet, pretend they never happened. But just like Joseph, it doesn't really work; help us Lord instead to bring those troubles and pains and hurts to you, and to ask you to bring healing, to bring forgiveness, to bring renewal. We pray these things in your name, Lord Jesus, amen.