

[Reading Genesis 39:1-23]

We're going to reflect on this passage for a few moments.

So, we left the story where Joseph was bought by the Midianite merchants, and was bought as a slave, and so we see the way that his brothers hated him so much, so he went from being a faithful son to being a slave. His brother hated him so much that they did this to be rid of him and his arrogant self-centred ways. As a slave Joseph would have walked through the desert to Egypt; he wouldn't have been on a camel, he probably would have been tied together with other slaves and forced to walk the hundreds of miles to get to Egypt. Each step that he took must have been a painful reminder of his new status in life as the lowest of the low. Once he was the favoured and pampered son of his father but now he was a slave. Perhaps he wondered: "What lies ahead for me in Egypt? Where is this all going to end? Am I going to die in the fields somewhere?" Questions must have haunted him like the ghosts of his previous life, yet deep within him there was still a hope that God would somehow move within his situation.

And he found himself to the highest bidder. It must have been hard in the slave market: imagine being put up onto the stage there so that everybody who looking to buy a slave could have a look at you and sort of like decide whether you look strong enough to be working in their field or whether you have any particular skills they were looking for. In the end, it was one of the Pharaohs' officials, the captain of The Palace Guard, who's bid for Joseph won the day. And so Joseph became the property of Potiphar. But of course it could have been a lot worse: he could have found himself out in the fields working in the immense heat of the Egyptian sun. But all the same it must have been tremendously humbling to find himself in this situation. And yet, it must have been a hard growing up experience for Joseph who was not used to hard work - remember we don't think he did a solid day's work when he lived at home, it was his older brothers who did all the hard work. But whatever Joseph set himself to (we read) the Lord was still blessing him, even in these hard circumstances. Potiphar saw Joseph's hard work and saw that he seemed to do well at everything, and Potiphar wisely gave him more responsibility. Out of the hardships of Joseph's circumstances came God's blessing and Potiphar was very pleased because he benefited from the blessing that God was pouring into Joseph's life. So he found blessing even out of hardship.

But, and what a but this is, Potiphar's wife fancied Joseph; human nature will always tend to come to the fore and Potiphar's wife pestered Joseph and put him in an impossible situation. Joseph's unwillingness to have an affair with Potiphar's wife, out of loyalty to Potiphar, motivated her to spitefully frame him as a person who would have done violence to her. And so how could Joseph, the lowest status person, escape from this situation? He couldn't! And so he went from being a favoured and favourite slave to once again being the lowest of the low; a prisoner. I think it's quite interesting that in verse 20 we read that Potiphar chose to imprison Joseph rather than to have him killed. I just think there's more to that than meets the eye; I think if Joseph had genuinely done this and Potiphar believed that his wife was entirely innocent, I think he would have had Joseph put to death immediately. I wonder whether Potiphar knew that perhaps his wife wasn't entirely innocent in this situation and Potiphar couldn't be seen to be taking the word of a slave over the word of his wife, and so he had to be seen to be punishing this slave for what he was being accused of.

But once again in these dire circumstances Joseph is blessed. Joseph is blessed. This time it's the prison warder who sees that God causes everything that Joseph does to prosper and so he trusts him, the prison warder trusts him, and give him more responsibility. But also gives him the freedom, even in prison, to act as he, Joseph, sees fit. Again it's this place of hardship in prison that becomes a place of blessing, even in these circumstances. Joseph learns that out of hardship and loss of status can come unexpected blessings because God is always faithful; even when we can't see it God is always faithful.

I read this story many years ago but it came to mind as I was thinking of this story about Joseph, and you're understand when I read it to you it mustn't be taken literally, but:

“One year there was a terrible flood that deluged a small mid-western town in the United States, and this town was located in a valley between two rivers, and both of these rivers had overflowed their banks and the rain continues to fall night and day. There was no relief in sight as the town slowly but surely found the waters getting closer and closer. Everyone was evacuated except for one old man who refused to leave his house, which was soon going to become submerged. “I have faith that God will save me!” the old man shouted at everyone who implored him to leave and flee to higher ground. The man believed in the power of prayer and that God would somehow save him.

“As the waters covered the roads making them impassible for vehicles, a man in a four wheel drive truck stopped at the old man's house and banged on the door, “Hurry,” he said, “come out with me and I'll drive you to safety; you haven't got much time!” But the old man continued to pray – he wouldn't leave his house.

“Within hours the water had risen several more feet completely flooding his home. The rain continued. The old man climbed up on his kitchen table and continued to pray. As the water lapping at his heels a man in a rowing boat paddled up to the old man's kitchen window and shouted through it “Sir! Come across; get into my boat, I'll take you to safety!” “NO!” the man shouted, “God will deliver me from this flood.”

“The water got deeper and soon the old man had not choice but to climb up onto the roof of his house. The torrential rains persisted. While he was praying he heard the “Chop-Chop-Chop” sound of a helicopter in the sky. He looked up and he saw the helicopter hovering over his house; a ladder has been lowered for him to climb. “GO AWAY!” the man yelled at the helicopter, “You'll blow me off my roof. God is going to save me! You go and save someone else.” The helicopter couldn't wait forever so it left the old man on his rooftop still praying.

“Eventually the water engulfed the house and the old man perished in the flood. (And this is the bit where you know it's not a true story, or it's not a story that we can tell from this side of heaven anyway.) When the old man arrived in heaven he asked God “O Lord, I prayed earnestly for the rains to stop and for your deliverance from the flood, but you left me to drown. I don't understand!” “My child,” replied the Lord, “I heard your prayers. I send you a four wheeled truck, a row boat and a helicopter. Why do you send them away?””

You see that God does want to answer our prayers, but he doesn't always answer in the way that we want him to. Sometimes we've got an agenda and we say: “Lord, I want you to answer my prayers, and I'd really like it if you answered them in this way so that particular problem would just disappear.” But of course it doesn't always work like that, and sometimes what God is saying to us is that we've got to come through our problems, and work them through, and actually learn more about ourselves through those things, because I've said to you before the times that I've grown

are the times not when God has simply made my problems disappear, but rather has been the times when I've had to apply myself to those problems and say, "Lord, how do you want me to come through this? How do you want me to deal with this difficulty? How do I find the strength to come through it and not to give in?" And it's at those times I've grown in my faith, and grown in my trust in the Lord, and found that at the other side of that problem I can see God's hand bringing me through it rather than making it disappear. So I believe that's part of what Joseph's experience was in that passage that we read.

Let's pray together.

Lord Jesus, we recognise that so often in the difficulties of life, those are the times when we discover that when you're all we've got to rely on we rely on you in a way that we wouldn't do when we had other resources, other possibilities, but actually Lord in our desperation we often come to you and find that we can rely on you, and we discover that you are the one who is faithful. You are the one who brings us through even some of the most difficult circumstances in life. And we reflect on those who have lost their lives in the last few months, either through Coronavirus or through other circumstances, who have loved you and have served you. And we recognise that they now, Lord, are with you in a way that we may mourn them. And we certainly miss them, and we commit them to your hands. But we do believe that you hold them in your love and your grace. And Lord God we know that we believe this life is not the end and wherever we should find ourselves, whatever circumstances, we trust you, and know you to be the God who is faithful to us, the rock on which we stand in life and in death. Amen.