**Joseph: A shepherd in the prison**

**June 3, 2018**

**Genesis 40-41**

**Key Verse 40:4a “The captain of the guard assigned them to Joseph, and he attended them.”**

From where we last visited, poor Joseph had been sentenced to prison for a crime he did not commit. He was an obedient servant of the Most High and yet he could not explain why such misfortune had fallen on him. During this time, it would be acceptable if Joseph had fallen in despair. He was sold to slavery by his own brothers and did not have a chance of freedom. He would probably spend the rest of his life there. However during his time there we see that God is with him every step of the way. We see earlier in chapter 39 that “While Joseph was there in the prison, the Lord was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden. So the warden put Joseph in charge of all those held in the prison, and he was made responsible for all that was done there. The warden paid no attention to anything under Joseph’s care, because the Lord was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did.” The remarkable reaction of Joseph showed how much he trusted in the creator God. Joseph remembered the dreams that God gave him and remained steadfast that one day God would honor him. Today we are going to visit Joseph who is in prison and see how the Lord used Joseph’s honesty and shepherd heart to save the whole world at that time. He worked hard in any circumstances to take care of those who were entrusted to him. He took care of the cupbearer and the baker in prison. He took care of Pharaoh and the whole Egypt and finally to his own family. I pray that we all may grow as a true shepherd like Joseph and take care of those who are entrusted to us in any circumstances believing in God’s sovereignty.

I. A shepherd in prison

Look at verses 5-7. Sometime later, two of Pharaoh's officials were put in the prison where Joseph was. They were political prisoners, so they were put in the king's prison. One was the king's cupbearer and the other, the king's baker. While these jobs may seem to be menial, actually they were very high level jobs. The cupbearer was frequently in the king's presence. He had to be a trustworthy man. The baker’s position also gave him access to the king’s food. He was in a position to poison the king. They had a high position in society because people believed that they could influence the king and rightfully so. We are not told anything about what these men were accused of, or whether they are guilty or innocent. The main point is that Joseph was put in charge of them. They became his sheep. He did not take care of them in a superficial way; he was sensitive to their needs.

It so happened that God spoke to them that night and they were restless. Many times God spoke to people through dreams and visions in the Old Testament. One reason may be that they did not have access to a bible. The next day Joseph saw them dejected and began a conversation with genuine concern. When we are in the pits of our life, it is hard to think about anyone else. We can spiral into how much life has been unfair for us. Joseph attending to their needs shows us his spiritual standing with God. It can be easy to think that we are in a tough situation due to something that we did. We may have been unfairly put in that position. Joseph showed that he trusted in God by deciding to shepherd these two individuals by faith despite his lowly position. The willingness of the butler to share his dream also shows that others could see that God was with Joseph. Likewise we need to have a shepherd heart to be welcoming to those who are perishing.

The cupbearer began to tell his dream. Look at verses 9-15. There were three vines and ripe grapes. The cupbearer saw himself squeezing and serving the pharaoh a cup of wine. The three vines symbolized three days and in three days Joseph confidently mentioned that the cupbearer would get his job back. In verse 14 we see that Joseph was so confident with God that he requests that the cupbearer remember him when he is freed. He did not ask for revenge but for his freedom. Joseph knew he did not belong there and was actively trying to get out.

When the baker had heard the good news, he too wanted to receive something similar. But the baker’s dream was bad news: His head would also be lifted up—on a pole—in three days. I wonder what the baker’s reaction would have been. I imagined that Joseph was probably attacked or cussed at. No one wants to be told that they are going to be executed in three days especially if it is from a dream. Here we see that Joseph did not sugar coat the message. He told it plainly as day. He was so sure of God’s word that he did not have to cut corners to make it sound realistic. This is the gospel, to some it is the message of hope and redemption and to others it is a message of judgement and condemnation. John 3:18 says “Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.” Both these men were sinners and both listened to the good news and the bad news. The cupbearer chose to listen to Joseph and found a new life in the palace. The baker did not heed Joseph’s warning. These men witnessed Joseph’s relationship with God and Joseph honored God by being blunt about His word. We often desire to talk about the good news of the gospel to those who believe but we must be real about the judgement that comes to those who do not. To be clear, we must warn others that if they do not yield to God’s will, they will suffer the consequence of yielding to their own will which is sinful and self-condemning.

II. A shepherd for Pharaoh

Soon after the incident, Joseph’s revelation was fulfilled and the baker was sent to the gallows. The cupbearer was honored and given his position back. He did however forget about Joseph. That would have been frustrating because you would think that the cupbearer could put two and two together and remember Joseph. Poor Joseph was stuck in prison for another two years. We are not told the details of those two years but boy reading that would have been depressing for me at least. We must praise God for his sovereign knowledge. When we think about it, if Joseph had been freed at that moment he would have returned to his father's household and lived as a nomad. God needed to grow Joseph’s shepherd heart because he would become the shepherd of the king soon. Look at verses 1-7; the pharaoh was disturbed by his dreams. They were very similar and signified an ill fate. God honored Joseph by reminding the cupbearer of what happened two years ago. Only the cupbearer could personally tell the Pharaoh about his experiences and the king decides to gamble on Joseph solely on the basis of the cupbearer’s testimony. We can see here the importance of having a trustworthy relationship with others if we want to share our testimony with them. Students may take the time to listen to our testimony when they understand that we genuinely care for them. This is how the Lord used the cupbearer to carry out his plan to save Egypt.

Joseph, now molded as a shepherd for the king was brought before him. Let’s read verses 14-16. “So Pharaoh sent for Joseph, and he was quickly brought from the dungeon. When he had shaved and changed his clothes, he came before Pharaoh. Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘I had a dream, and no one can interpret it. But I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it.’ ‘I cannot do it,’ Joseph replied to Pharaoh, ‘but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires.’” We can see that Joseph answered and cared for the King the same way he cared for the cupbearer and the baker while in prison. First, he humbly denied his own ability to solve their problems. Next he pointed them to the one true God that they could look to for the questions they had. Today, Joseph was God’s mouthpiece. He eloquently explained how both dreams were a warning to Egypt. They would have 7 years of great abundance followed by 7 years of famine. The famine would be so severe that the previous 7 years would be forgotten. It must have been very challenging to tell the king about the upcoming phenomenon. Any other person in his position would be afraid. What if it was not true? Joseph held firm and explained the situation regardless of how absurd it may have sounded to the council. When I compare Joseph’s conversation with the cupbearer and the King we notice that following his interpretation, Joseph does not ask for any personal favors. Previously he had asked the cupbearer to help him get out of prison. Now even when he is before the King he does not make a personal request. The King surely had more power to grant him his freedom. Joseph instead showed interest in caring for the people of Egypt.

Let’s read verses 33-36. “And now let Pharaoh look for a discerning and wise man and put him in charge of the land of Egypt. Let Pharaoh appoint commissioners over the land to take a fifth of the harvest of Egypt during the seven years of abundance. They should collect all the food of these good years that are coming and store up the grain under the authority of Pharaoh, to be kept in the cities for food. This food should be held in reserve for the country, to be used during the seven years of famine that will come upon Egypt, so that the country may to be ruined by the famine.” God gave Joseph wisdom as a shepherd. Joseph went above and beyond explaining the dream to requesting that the King prepare for the coming famine. In some sense, it seemed presumptuous that Joseph spoke out of turn. He was a mere prisoner and it seemed like he was making the wrong move. God miraculously opened Pharaoh’s eyes to see that there was no one in Egypt that could give him the interpretation and was bold enough to advise him correctly. Most importantly, the pharaoh saw that God was with Joseph just as he was when Joseph was at Potiphar's home. The King ordained Joseph as the prime minister of Egypt. He took his own signet ring, placed in on Joseph and paraded him around the city. Joseph however did not see this as the fulfillment of God’s dream to him yet. I am sure that he may have had a hit list of the people who wronged him. Potiphar’s wife would have been the first on the list. Instead he began his work immediately.

God gave him a religious woman as his wife and she bore him two sons. The first he named Manasseh. This meant that God had helped him forget all the troubles in his father’s household. This showed that Joseph did not hold a grudge against anyone who wronged him. He forgave them and continued to hold on to God’s promises. The second son’s name was Ephraim. This means “twice fruitful”. Joseph did not deny that he suffered in Egypt. He remembered God’s faithfulness in his life. He understood by faith that his suffering produced fruit that enabled him to care for others. With training, God was able to train Joseph from attending two people to a whole nation. During the 7 years of prosperity, It would have been easy to forget the pharaoh's dream. Many citizens probably thought that the famine would never come. Joseph took God’s word seriously, he instructed the people to ration and store food in the cities. He did it so well that they could not keep a record of it. Many times it must have also been tempting to go back and confront his brothers or reunite with his father. Joseph left his home when he was 17 and he started working when he was 30. Joseph waited. God would later reunite them after over 20 years of separation.

From Joseph’s life we can see that he did not ask God to help him escape from the difficult situations that he faced. Instead he endured. This shows that Joseph grew in maturity and could face stronger challenge. Joseph also had trust in God’s timing. He was patient. This did not mean that he just sat down and waited. Joseph prepared his mind and spirit for the time that God would use him mightily. This he did by being a responsible shepherd for his flock. When Joseph looked to the interests of others, his problems became insignificant. In the end he was able to forgive his wrongdoers and forget his past suffering because it was nothing compared to the task that God had given him now. In hindsight, we see that during Joseph’s trials, God was his shepherd because He was with Joseph. King David also acknowledges this when he writes in Psalms 23. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want”. Jesus is our good shepherd who laid his own life down to reconcile our relationship. Now while living in His grace, we are enabled to shepherd and disciple others. We could be in a figurative prison or in an esteemed position. God will use us mightily in any situation to witness and love his flock on earth.

Joseph’s responsibility grew tenfold when he became the Prime Minister. The lives of the citizens of Egypt and later the whole world was under his responsibility. It was probably more stressful than being an attendant to prisoners. Worldly promotions can be a byproduct of God’s plan for us but it is a tool for us to further his kingdom. I got a promotion in January. I was very happy. But with the promotion came a big responsibilities. It was difficult at first. During this time my friend Joel from high school came to stay with me. He was going through a rough patch in life. Unknown to me, God helped me shepherd him through doing bible study with him throughout that week. I shared with him my struggles at work and I was able to tell him that him being here was an encouragement for me, Joel is doing great right now and recently got a job at an insurance company. From writing this message I learned that Joseph was a shepherd in any circumstance. both in bad times and in good times. He was a servant of the Most High. Then God could use him to save lives. Today as shepherds for God’s flock, we must be like Joseph who endured the hardships of this world of ungrace. We hold on to the command of Jesus to feed his flock. I pray that this summer we can grow and serve our students faithfully.