

Pastor Tom Mortenson

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Now You See Me, Now You Don't, Part 4

Genesis 37-40

Prayer: *Father, we just again, we thank you and we praise you for the fact that we can gather together. What a gift that truly is. I thank you for this body of believers, Lord, and I just thank you for the gifts that you've given to us. You've given us your word, you've given us your Holy Spirit, and you've given us this opportunity to open up your book and learn from it. And so this morning, Lord, as we do just that, I pray for the presence of your Spirit; guide us, direct us, make this of permanent value, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

"God loves you and has a perfect plan for your life." How many of you have ever heard that phrase? I think most of you did. The statement is absolutely true, but it contains an inherent misunderstanding centered around our understanding of the word "perfect". If you ask me what kind of day I had and I said, "It was an absolutely perfect day," you could rightly assume that I was saying that anything that could go right went right and at the end of the day a grand time was had by all. That's kind of the subtext

of the statement "God has a perfect plan for your life." Ask Jesus your into life and he will show you a perfect solution to all of life's problems, and that is one hundred percent true. What's not stated or even implied in that statement is that asking Jesus into your life is going to automatically bring about a whole new set of problems that you never knew existed before. Asking Jesus into your life means choosing sides in a war that's gone on since the fall of Adam. I mean, previously you could just kind of blend into the woodwork of the working of this world and now as citizens of the kingdom of God you have declared yourself to the world, to a world that promises to hate you for doing so. Jesus said in *John 15*: *"If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you."*

See, as a child of God you are now part of God's perfect plan not just for your life but for the kingdom as well. You may not have realized it but you've now become part of a much bigger agenda than you've ever even imagined. God has every intention of transforming you into the image of his Son and in the process he's going to use you to bring honor and glory to him and his kingdom. That's what you sign on when you accept Christ as your savior. Jesus as the king of the world was never evasive about identifying the cost of following. This is what he said in *Luke 14*. He said: *"Any one of*

you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple."

That's serious business, I mean God has every intention of shaping and molding you as his disciple into the very image of his son.

Romans 8:28 says: *"that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose,"* and every single event in your life is aimed and directed at that process. God causes all things to work together for good as he defines it, not as we do. God's intention is that we be perfected in our faith. And so you can say that God does love us and God does have a perfect plan for our lives but when you say that, understand that perfect plan is perfect by his standard and not ours. My perfect plan might be for a sickness-free life with a lovely home and a paid off mortgage and healthy, well-adjusted kids and at least two vacations a year. God's perfect plan for me could be that very thing or it could be like it was for Joseph.

This morning we're looking at how "now you see me, now you don't" worked God's perfect plan for the life of Joseph. It's a classic example of how Joseph fit into a far greater kingdom agenda than even he could imagine, and it was that kingdom agenda that was the source of a great deal of Joseph's pain. You see, God never sat Joseph down and said, "Joseph, you're just a shepherd boy but my intention is to make you vice regent of all of Egypt and to use you to feed my people and save a nation." God never said, "I've got a

perfect plan for your life, Joseph. It's going to include some very difficult hiccups here and there, and you're going to be wondering frequently if I'm still there, but trust me, I've got all of this taken care of." Instead, God made his plan known to Joseph in steps and stages that happened only after he had walked through circumstances that shouted that if God truly did have a plan, it must have gone off the rails somewhere because Joseph's life was anything but perfect. I mean this was a plan that included betrayal and abandonment and kidnapping and false accusations and prison, but it was an absolutely perfect plan for Joseph. It was perfectly planned and executed according to God's agenda for Joseph and for his people. And here's where faith becomes a crucial part of our walk; here's where the rubber really meets the road. God does love us and he does have a perfect plan for each of our lives but it's according to his agenda which oftentimes does not match ours. Like I said, my agenda is to be comfortable, to be safe, secure. God's agenda for me is to be a sanctified image of his son here to advance the kingdom of God. And sometimes those agendas, they include peace and comfort, but lots of times they don't.

According to a recent survey by Open Doors, 320, approximately, Christians are killed for their faith every single month; 214 churches and Christian properties are destroyed; 772 forms of violence such as beatings, abductions, rapes, arrests, and forced

marriages are committed against Christians each month. That's more than a thousand lives that are plunged into horrors like Joseph experienced each month and we say, was God missing in action during these times or is his agenda like Joseph's agenda far bigger than we can imagine.

See, "now you see me, now you don't" is about God's presence or absence in each of our lives. And it's about growing faith when the evidence for it seems scarce. It's what Paul declares in *Hebrews 11:1*. He says: *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.* And what God is most concerned about building into our lives is the assurance of the one thing that we all hope for, and that is that my relationship with Jesus Christ will define and empower me for living life here on this earth for his glory. Along with that is a conviction that in spite of the fact that what we can't see, hear, feel, taste or touch, the fact that we can't do that with the God that we believe in, means that we still, like Joseph, spend the rest of our life growing our capacity to trust in these things that are just not seen.

What makes our faith unique is the idea of faith itself, I mean, every other religion will tell you that the way to get right with God is to work at it. And God tells us over and over again in the

pages of scripture that we are fallen, broken creatures incapable of producing works that are acceptable to a perfect God. We know God's solution was to become one of us, to live the life we could never live and then offer that life as a substitute for our broken lives and we get a right standing before God not by working at it but by trusting in God's perfect work that he accomplished for us on the cross. And so right from the get-go God's agenda for you and me is to grow in his children their capacity to trust, their capacity to believe, their capacity to exercise faith. That was the agenda that defined Joseph's life and it's what defines our lives as well. I mean, God had this agenda for Joseph that he could neither see nor even begin to fathom, but he didn't need to. Like Abraham he simply had to believe God and move forward. *For, what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness."* And if we understand that the capacity to believe God is really what God is interested in growing in us, then we will be able to understand better what God's agenda for each of us is. And his perfect plan for our lives is that we, like Joseph, simply trust him and move forward.

So the first part of God's agenda in your life and mine is the growth in our lives of faith, and that's why God sometimes inserts himself into our lives and then pulls back. Why it is that when it comes to God "now you see me, now you don't" is often the only way

that our faith develops. I mean we saw it in Abraham's life when God powerfully interacts within Abraham repeatedly, then he appears to disappear. We say he is perceptively absent because we know that he's not. We know from Romans 8 that God promises us that nothing is going to separate us from the love of God. And we also know from studying the lives of those whom he poured that love out on that God frequently asserts himself into our lives and then pulls back allowing us to grow in our efforts to trust him, to develop our capacity for faith.

So this morning I want to look at the life of Joseph as one of the great saints of scripture to see God's faith-building process in action because Joseph really is a classic case study in "now you see me, now you don't." And there's a reason why Joseph's story is there for us to read and study in scripture. It is the story of God's faithfulness that hardly looked anything like faithfulness from Joseph's side of the story. It's a story of God's agenda superimposed on Joseph's life and we have the benefit of scripture laying it all out. We get to see Joseph's life at the ten thousand-foot level, but Joseph had to live it at street level. And from that perspective you'd be hard-pressed to find someone better who seemed to do everything right and yet have everything go so wrong. When you get down to street level and you look at life through Joseph's eyes, you see this very different picture. His

life seemed to constantly go from bad to worse even though every step of the way his conduct was exemplary. I mean at street level you might say of Joseph's friendship with God, with friends like these, really who needs enemies? It's only when you look at the big picture and you begin to see God's big agenda that you begin to understand God's interaction with Joseph. And the more you understand how deeply beloved by God Joseph was, the more you will gain insight into how God is growing faith in your life.

Joseph was the favored child of Jacob and Rachel. His life consists of a series of events that takes him from his life as a favored child of a family of shepherds through a series of circumstances where he repeatedly becomes the victim of other people's sins. Like I said, an outsider looking at Joseph's life might conclude that if Joseph was chosen and deeply loved by God it might be far better to be unchosen and unloved because his life was a mess.

Our story starts out with a tail of intrigue. Joseph's jealous brothers hated him because he was clearly his father's favorite, and we pick up at *Genesis 37:3*. It says: *Now Israel -- that's Jacob's other name -- Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his sons, because he was the son of his old age. And he made him a robe of many colors. But when his brothers saw that their*

father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peacefully to him.

Joseph, he's handsome, he's gifted, he's doted on by his father Jacob. He's the one who received the many-colored coat. If you ever want advice on how to not raise a large family, you might want to look at Jacob. Because Joseph is the recipient of special treatment his brothers hated him. He's either naive or swell headed when he decided to tell his family about this incredible dream that he just had. This is *Genesis 37:5*, it says: *Now Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers they hated him even more. He said to them, "Hear this dream that I have dreamed: Behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and behold, my sheaf arose and stood upright. And behold, your sheaves gathered around it and bowed down to my sheaf." His brothers said to him, "Are you indeed to reign over us? Or are you indeed to rule over us?" So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words. Then he dreamed another dream and told it to his brothers and said, "Behold, I have dreamed another dream. Behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me." But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him and said to him, "What is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall I and your mother and your brothers indeed come to bow ourselves to the ground before you?" And his brothers were jealous of him, but his father*

kept the saying in mind.

Well his father Jacob made a lot of mistakes and he made another big one. He sent his brothers out to graze the flocks and then he sent Joseph to check up on them. Joseph gets lost and he finally finds his brothers and they see him coming a long way off. We pick up at verse 18: *They saw him from afar, and before he came near to them they conspired against him to kill him. They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits. Then we will say that a fierce animal has devoured him, and we will see what will become of his dreams."* Well at this suggestion brother Reuben steps in, he says, no, no, no bloodshed. No, no, let's hide him in this cistern. And he actually intended to get him out later. So they take him, they take off his fancy multi-colored coat and they throw him in this old cistern and they sit down to celebrate. As they begin to eat, they see this caravan heading to Egypt. Again verse 26: *Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother, our own flesh."* And his brothers listened to him. Then Midianite traders passed by. And they drew Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. They took Joseph to Egypt. Now to make matters

worse verse 29 says: *When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he tore his clothes and returned to his brothers and said, "The boy is gone, and I, where shall I go?"* Then they took Joseph's robe and slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood. And they sent the robe of many colors and brought it to their father and said, *"This we have found; please identify whether it is your son's robe or not."* Just note that phrase, "your son's robe." It's not "our brother's robe," it's not "here's Joseph's robe," it's "your son's robe." In verse 33 it says: *And he identified it and said, "It is my son's robe. A fierce animal has devoured him. Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces."* Then Jacob tore his garments and put sackcloth on his loins and mourned for his son many days. All his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted and said, *"No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning."* Thus his father wept for him.

Now just imagine the hypocrisy, imagine the depraved wickedness of Joseph's brothers, I mean, they -- quote -- "rose up to comfort Jacob," but Joseph wasn't even dead and they knew it. They just watched his agony and did nothing. It goes on to say in verse 36: *Meanwhile the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard.* So Joseph goes from a life of comfort to a life of slavery simply by being obedient to

his father. And so we say, okay, where is God in all of this? See "now you see me, now you don't" often takes place like it did in Joseph's case. God just seems conspicuously absent. Here's Joseph, he's simply obeying his father's commands and he winds up first being thrown in a cistern and now he's being bought and sold as a slave. This is a 17-year-old kid whose obedience gets him thrust out from the life of a shepherd into the life of a household slave in a foreign country and culture. Circumstance shouted to Joseph that life is a crap shoot unconnected to a sovereign God and that at any moment bad luck and bad people can rob you of your life and future. This is the place where you'd expect God to break through to assure Joseph that, oh, things make look bleak but that God's got everything under control. But things didn't just look bleak, things were bleak. And God appeared to be completely absent.

You see we get to see the big picture in Joseph's life. We find out in scripture that not one step of Joseph's life was uncared for and unseen, but that information was never given to Joseph. In fact it's been revealed to us in the very next verse, verse two to four of *Genesis 39* says: *The LORD was with Joseph*. I mean we need to stop right there. We need to park for a minute. We need to let that sink in. Because what God is insisting here is that in the middle of Joseph's betrayal, abandonment and enslavement God is

insisting I'm there in the middle of this. And what's the first thing we think when things go south on us? It's where are you God? I mean if we've been trying our best to do everything right and things still go south, we think, God, how could you let this happen? I don't imagine those thoughts were that far from Joseph's mind as well. The scripture goes on to say: *The LORD was with Joseph, and he became a successful man, and he was in the house of his Egyptian master. His master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD caused all that he did to succeed in his hands. So Joseph found favor in his sight and attended him, and he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had.*

So Joseph goes on to excel in his new position as Potiphar's house slave and it's only because God is guiding every single step that Joseph takes. We pick it up and it says: *So he left all that he had in Joseph's charge, and because of him he had no concern about anything but the food he ate. Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance. And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, "Lie with me." But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Behold, because of me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my charge. He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except you, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?"*

So what's probably the very first instance recorded of sexual harassment on the job, Joseph repeatedly resists. And eventually in a jealous rage Potiphar's wife frames him for rape. And for all his efforts to do the right thing, Joseph gets thrown into jail. So from Joseph's standpoint this is not a case of "now you see me, now you don't," I mean, Joseph hasn't seen any direct evidence whatsoever of even "now you see me." His only evidence that he's seen is that he's a victim of circumstance. Everything he did was right and true and noble and proper, and his reward for his faithfulness and loyalty is a dungeon. I mean if you're Joseph sitting in that jail cell, how do you think you would feel? I mean my guess is you'd be feeling bewildered, abandoned and alone and yet nothing could be further from the truth. You see prison is exactly where God wanted Joseph. Prison was the staging area that wound up thrusting him into Pharaoh's court itself. So I look at the situation, I say oh, God, you know, if you only sat Joseph down and said, "be patient Joseph, I got great plans for you. They're going to unfold slowly but eventually you're going to see I've got your back in this." But that never happens, and there's a reason why. What God is doing here is he's forcing Joseph to trust him in spite of circumstances and in spite of an explanation that would take away the reason for faith. See, apparently God knows what he's doing. I mean there's nowhere in scripture any record of God giving any explanation whatsoever to Joseph for why he's sitting in

a prison cell. We know why but he never did. We have the privilege Joseph never had. We have the privilege of seeing his life as God saw it and the only reason we know God was with Joseph is that God told us. In fact he told us three times. He told us he was with him as a slave in verse 2. He says: *The LORD was with Joseph, and he was a successful man; and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian.* He told us he was with him as a prisoner. In verse 21, it says: *But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him mercy, and He gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison.* And finally God says I'm with you as a prison trustee. Verse 23 says: *The keeper of the prison did not look into anything that was under Joseph's authority, because the LORD was with him; and whatever he did, the LORD made it prosper.* I mean God made it clear that he was there at the start and he was there in the midst of everything that took place. I mean Joseph may have had ample reason to wonder what God meant by being with him, I mean, for all practical purposes it looked like he had been completely abandoned by God.

You see it goes against our thinking to think that God would allow bad things to happen to folks who are struggling to live godly lives because consciously or unconsciously we just assume that bad things emanate only from bad behavior. And that clouds all of our thinking. I mean *John 9* describes this. It says: *Now as Jesus*

passed by, He saw a man who was blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, saying, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" See there's only two reasons that the disciples could imagine for this set of circumstances. I mean something bad happened, so somebody had to be responsible, and it was either this man or his parents. I mean they never considered that God might have had a different agenda. And when Jesus said: *"Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him,"* he was pointing out how easy it is to misunderstand suffering and struggle for yourself and for others, because it's nothing new. It's been around forever. I mean understand Job's friends got it all wrong. They looked at Job and they looked at the misery that he was in and they concluded what? Well, he must have done somebody wrong. The disciples showed that the quickest way to get a wrong answer is to simply ask the wrong question. "Who sinned" was for the disciples the wrong question. And Joseph apparently never asked those kinds of questions and that's the reason why he triumphed. You see he had a right perspective, a right priority and he had a plan for each and every incident that took place in his life. I mean he told Potiphar's wife as she tried to seduce him -- quote -- *"How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?"* So first he's affirming that he has the right perspective, he knows who God is, he knows that God is the sovereign omnipotent God from whom nothing

is hidden; secondly, he has the right priority, he knows who he is in relation to his God, he knows that adultery was a wicked transgression of God's law; and thirdly, he affirmed that he had a plan. *2 Timothy* says: *Flee youthful lusts* and Joseph did just that, I mean, he took off running. His loyalty earns him nothing but a prison sentence, but it also enables him to handle the misery that follows.

So Joseph is now in prison and the Lord is clearly with him and he makes prison, the prison into a topnotch place. We pick up at verse 22. It says: *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 good news is that the Lord was with Joseph and the bad news is that his circumstances continue to go from bad to worse.

Well the next chapter opens ominously with these three words: "Some time later". *The cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt offended their master, the king of Egypt. Pharaoh was angry with his two officials, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker, and put them in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, in the same prison where Joseph was confined. The captain of the*

guard assigned them to Joseph, and he attended them. After they had been in custody for some time. "Some time later". Joseph was already in prison. I mean he'd already been there falsely accused of rape when some time later Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker get arrested. Quote -- after they had been in custody for some time, each of these two men have a dream. Pick up at verse 6: When Joseph came to them the next morning, he saw that they were dejected. So he asked Pharaoh's officials who were in custody with him in his master's house, "Why do you look so sad today?" "We both had dreams," they answered, "but there is no one to interpret them." Then Joseph said to them, "Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell me your dreams." So Joseph correctly interprets both of their dreams and then he asks one thing of the cupbearer: "But remember me when it is well with you, and please show kindness to me; make mention of me to Pharaoh, and get me out of this house." Guess what. That never happened. Verse 23 says: The chief cupbearer, however, did not remember Joseph; he forgot him.

The first verse of chapter 41 says: "Then it came to pass, at the end of two full years, that Pharaoh had a dream." Joseph sat in that prison for two full years after he was abandoned by the cupbearer and he'd already been there for years. I just want you to imagine what those years must have been like. Say you were imprisoned in May and after the first few weeks you think, okay,

I've told the cupbearer the story, I'm sure he's going to square this away, I'm going to get out of here. And so May, June and July go by and you realize that things are not happening quickly. August September, November go by, you start to adjust once again to yet another routine. December and January and February you realize the cupbearer's completely forgotten you, and it's not even a year yet. So March and April and May come and you celebrate -- quote, unquote -- your first full year of abandonment even by the cupbearer even though you've been in prison for who knows how long. I mean, we know he's already got another year to go but think of this from his perspective, he's thinking this is a life sentence, and all he ever did was honor God. All he ever did was be right and true and loyal. So June, July and August comes and he gives up hope in the cupbearer and then there's September, October and November, he's adjusting again to a life of abandonment and then December, January, February comes and he spends time perhaps reflecting on what he told the cupbearer. He told him: *"I was forcibly carried off from the land of the Hebrews, and even here I have done nothing to deserve being put in a dungeon."* And March and April and May come by, and we've only spent two years of all the years that Joseph sat in that prison. And I can tell you what I genuinely think happened to Joseph during those two years that he spent waiting for God. I can make an educated guess based on the experience of others who went through this same thing and you know

what in all likelihood happened during those two years? Absolutely nothing. My guess is there were no hints, there were no signs, there were no tidbits, there were no clues. My guess is the heavens just turned to brass. And I don't base this on my experience, I base this on Richard Wurmbrand's. He's the founder of *Voice of the Martyrs*. If anyone would know what a prison experience would feel like, it's him. He spent 14 years in Romanian prisons being tortured for Christ, so he has kind of a unique insight into a place few of us have ever been. And this is what he says about his experience. He says: "I shared and viewed the sufferings of many fellow prisoners in an underground communist prison. What intrigued us most was that we did not obtain from heaven what it was obviously reasonable to expect: a slight improvement in our situation, food to quiet our hunger, an abatement of the cruel torture. We did not get what we expected because heaven is not (humanly speaking) reasonable!"

Reverend Wurmbrand is a lot like Joseph, he's an innocent man imprisoned for serving Christ. You might think it's reasonable that God at least give him a wink or a nod, some kind of signal, some kind of idea that he sees him and that he hears him, that he appreciates his sacrifice. Nothing. Not even -- quote -- "a slight improvement in the situation" -- unquote.

So what do you do when God and heaven itself seems to be absolutely unreasonable? Or silent? Or indifferent? And understand, you don't have to be sitting in a prison like Reverend Wurmbrand or Joseph to feel the silence of heaven, to experience the agony of "now you see me, now you don't." Just live a normal Christian life and at some point the silence of heaven will seem normal because normal is all a matter of perspective, and normal is this side of heaven, *we walk by faith and not by sight*. Again *Hebrews 1:11: Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.*

So seeing no supernatural intervention is normal. Paul said: *So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.* Okay, so how do we do that? Well instead of being mystified that God hasn't materialized as I thought he would, I'd do what Joseph did. I work at the task of gaining or regaining the right perspective on who God is and a right priority of who I am in relation to him.

Sitting in his jail cell Reverend Wurmbrand made this observation about how unreasonable heaven seems at times. This is what he said. He said: "Was it reasonable to sacrifice the life of the unique Son of God for witless, dirty, dumb, sheep? I have asked many shepherds what they would do if they saw a wolf. They all

replied: 'We would run for our lives!' No man dies for sheep. Yet Jesus did. He died for beings worse than sheep. He died for those who demanded His crucifixion. He died for His killers, for those who blaspheme and hate God. Do not be surprized if you fail to get from God what you might reasonably expect. If He were truly reasonable, he would never listen to the prayers of people like us, nor would we have salvation. Rather, God loves to the point of folly."

I mean I look at that and say how does 14 years in a communist prison produce those kind of thoughts? I mean how does being denied a reasonable expectation that God would reveal himself to his persecuted saints fill him with such love and confidence? It's all a matter of perception, and perception is a function of grace. You see every time life hands us a struggle God gives us a choice and the choice is always between grace or bitterness. And trust me, you all know bitterness is delicious. It's also highly addictive. I mean it's an appetite that grows every time you indulge in it. The enemy uses bitterness to whisper to you what he probably whispered to Joseph and Reverend Wurmbrand about how uncaring and how unreasonable God is and how delicious bitterness is. But know this, right beside the bitterness will always be the grace of God there for the taking. *Hebrews 12:15* says: *See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows*

up to cause trouble and defile many.

See, bitterness dogs us when circumstance turns against us and many times it dares us to compare our lot with others whose load seems a lot easier. Big mistake. Tim Keller points out that we all know people who seem to just sail through life with nary a breeze against them. Mostly he said these folks are shallow, empty and lacking in character. And we stop and think, do you know anybody who is a person of real solid character who's had a breeze of a life? Try to imagine anyone in scripture who's life was a cakewalk. I mean the only one I think of when I think of that is the rich man in Luke 15 and things didn't turn out so hot for him in the end.

And still when life becomes painful, when heaven seems silent, it's hard not to question God's faithfulness especially when it's you who are being singled out. Listen again to Reverend Wurmbbrand, this is what he said. He said: "If you are in the sad situation of experiencing neither God's reason nor His mad love, you might consider the fact that in the parable of the lost sheep ONLY the lost sheep had proof of God's love and concern. The others could reasonably say they were neglected and abandoned. When the prodigal son returned home, he was embraced with love, given a ring, and feted with the fatted calf, music, and dancing. The

faithful son who came in from the fields all tired out and sweaty was not even greeted with a kind word. Those who are faithful should simply be glad that OTHERS experienced His love to folly."

What he's saying is sometimes it's normal to feel abandoned and the solution is to rejoice for those who are in the center of God's love and attention. Well that's a tall order when you're in pain, but that's exactly what the solution to bitterness is. See bitterness has one primary goal and that's to turn our focus inward toward ourselves and our lot and our situation, our circumstances. It sees me first and foremost. Grace is the exact opposite. Grace seeks to help, to comfort. Regardless of the circumstances it always sees others first.

I love Joseph's question to Pharaoh's officials when they were in jail. Let me just repeat it. It says: *When Joseph came to them the next morning, he saw that they were dejected. So he asked Pharaoh's officials who were in custody with him in his master's house, "Why do you look so sad today?"* That question is really the story of Joseph's attitude toward life. If anyone has a right to be sad, it's Joseph. And so he's putting others first when it's his father, his slave master, or his prison master, regardless, they're all put first and he's able to do so because he knew who his God was. He knew he was not some randomly assembled collection

of molecules whose meaning in life came from himself. He knew that somehow he fit into a much bigger picture that had God -- and not Joseph -- at its center. That knowledge gave him all the perspective he needed to embrace the grace that God was giving him that moment even while he was sitting in a dungeon. I mean we may not be sitting in a real dungeon but bitterness can create one for us even if we live in a palace. And Joseph is uniquely qualified because he wound up living in both. And next week we're going to look not in the prison part but at the palace part of "now you see me, now you don't." You see, God really does love us. The cross is all the proof that we need of that. And he really does have a perfect plan for our lives, just like he had with Joseph. Joseph is able to see the plan even though he had far less evidence than we do. We've got Jesus. We've got the cross. *Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.*

Let's pray.

Father, I just again, I thank you for Joseph, I thank you for this marvelous example that we have of what it is like to live selflessly, to embrace the grace that you've given him to resist

the bitterness that was right there for the taking. Lord, Joseph's life is our life. Every one of us has a perfect plan unfolding before us. And we all, like Joseph, have had times where we felt that we're in some kind of prison of abandonment or some kind of place where God is impossible to find. I pray that you would give us the grace and the insight and the wisdom to trust in you like Reverend Wurmbrand did, like Joseph did, like all of us can when we focus in on you and not on ourselves. And I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.