

## JOSEPH IN PRISON

**TEXT: GENESIS 40:1-23**

### **INTRODUCTION:**

1. Joseph was put into prison by Potiphar (39:20). The word translated “dungeon” (40:15) is literally “a pit,” a dirty, miserable hole.
2. One preacher described Joseph’s dungeon this way: “There was no arrangements made for cleanliness. And the filth and the stinks and the vermin of those prisons to us is indescribable. The floors were black with the stain of the dirt and the filth. Into that awful place Joseph finally was lowered; down, and down, and down” (W.A. Criswell).
3. In addition to being in a dirty, smelly dungeon with no windows and no sunlight and no fresh air, Joseph was in iron shackles. Psalm 105:18 says, “Whose feet they hurt with fetters: he was laid in iron.”
4. But the LORD was with Joseph (39:2, 3, 21, 23).
5. Joseph was faithful to God under all circumstances, whether in Potiphar’s home or in prison. Joseph never compromised his convictions, and therefore he never lost spiritual power or weakened his witness for God.
6. In Genesis 39:21, we see that Joseph had quickly influenced the keeper of his prison, and now in Genesis 40 we will see more examples of how “the LORD was with him.”

- I. JOSEPH WORKING
- II. JOSEPH WATCHING
- III. JOSEPH WAITING

### **I. JOSEPH WORKING (40:1-4).**

1. Not long after Joseph arrived in prison, two of Pharaoh’s officers, the chief of the butlers, and the chief of the bakers, were thrown into prison also (40:1-3).
2. To these two officers Joseph was appointed as servant, and so “he served them” (Gen. 40:4). Interestingly, it was Potiphar (40:4; cf. 39:1) who appointed Joseph to attend to these prisoners. As the “captain of the guard,” Potiphar had the oversight and charge of the prison.

3. Although the dungeon was very unpleasant, and the circumstances were hard, and his imprisonment was the result of gross injustice, it made no difference to the faithfulness and loyalty with which Joseph did his duty.
4. It is very difficult to suffer without getting discouraged, but Joseph consistently maintained a patient and cheerful spirit.

*Sometimes the sky looks dark with not a ray of light,  
We're tossed and driven on, no human help in sight;  
But there is one in heaven who knows our deepest care,  
Let Jesus solve your problem, just go to Him in prayer.* – Esther Kerr Rusthoi

5. W.H. Griffith Thomas said, “Joseph had learned the secret of suffering uncomplainingly, and in the strength of his personal trust in God he won the victory over self” (*Genesis*).
6. “Victory over self” is one of the keys to Joseph’s greatness. Joseph was not set back by self-will and self-indulgence, self-seeking and self-complacency, self-glorying and self-esteem, self-importance and self-vindication, self-love and self-righteousness.
7. Joseph was free from all of this. God was everything to Joseph, so there was no room for the self-life. Joseph said to the chief butler and the baker, “Do not interpretations belong to God?” (40:8b). God was everything to Joseph.
8. And as Joseph faithfully served God by serving others, little did he know how God would use his association with the butler and baker to bring him out of prison, and into Pharaoh’s palace.
9. Because of the wonderful providence of God, the relationship of Joseph with Pharaoh's two officers had far-reaching results. We are reminded that even the smallest circumstances of life have meaning.
10. The LORD can use small things as well as big things to accomplish His will. At the time, no one could have foreseen that the association of these two officers of Pharaoh with the Hebrew slave would have brought about such far-reaching results.
11. W.H. Griffith Thomas said, “It may be literally said that we do not really know the profound significance of many of the simplest details of daily life. Happy is the man whose eye is open to see the hand of God in every-day events, for to him life always possesses a wonderful and true joy and glory” (*Genesis*).

*I'm trusting to, the unseen hand,  
That guides me through this weary land  
When some sweet day I'll reach that strand,  
Still guided by the unseen hand*

12. Joseph's faithful devotion to God did not stand in the way of his earthly promotion. Worldly men like Potiphar and the prison warden are able to recognize real character, and they are quick to take advantage of it.
13. "Genuine loyalty to God will always express itself in absolute faithfulness in every-day duty" (Thomas, *Genesis*).

## **II. JOSEPH WATCHING (40:5-19)**

1. As Joseph was waiting and watching, he noticed that Pharaoh's officers were sad (40:5-7).
2. Joseph's dreams stirred up resentment from his brothers, but here in prison his ability to interpret dreams proved very helpful (40:8).
3. Joseph's two prisoners, the chief butler and the chief baker, each dreamed a dream in one night, and the men were puzzled and sad because they were unable to understand the meaning of what they had dreamed.
4. Joseph noticed their sad countenances, and said to them, "Do not interpretations belong to God? tell me them, I pray you" (40:8b).
5. So they proceeded to tell him their dreams (40:8-11).
6. What is very notable in Joseph's character is his cheerfulness amidst hardship, his kindness, and his attractive combination of ability and agreeableness.
7. W.H. Griffith Thomas said Joseph was raised by God to a position of trust, "and at the same time manifested such personal amiability and attractiveness that he became acceptable to those around him. It is not often that we find so delightful a combination of personal characteristics. Sometimes we find ability without attractiveness, in which case the man is admired and even respected, but is feared, and people are apt to keep him at a distance. On the other hand, we sometimes find agreeableness without ability, which gives the man an attractiveness for a while, but his superficiality at length becomes evident and his amiability counts for very little in the eyes of earnest and serious people. When, however, ability and attractiveness are combined, we have a man

of real power whose influence for good can scarcely be limited”  
(*Genesis*).

8. That is an excellent description of Joseph. Joseph was a most remarkable man, and with the exception of Daniel, there is no one else like him in the Bible.

### III. JOSEPH WAITING (40:20-23)

1. Joseph was not a complainer but naturally he was eager to get out of the miserable dungeon. Joseph told the chief butler that within three days he would be released from prison and Pharaoh would restore him to his job.
2. Then Joseph added, “But think on me when it shall be well with thee, and shew kindness, I pray thee, unto me, and make mention of me unto Pharaoh, and bring me out of this house: For indeed I was stolen away out of the land of the Hebrews: and here also have I done nothing that they should put me into the dungeon” (40:13-15).
3. Joseph was wise to take the opportunity of appealing to the chief butler to use his influence to get him out of the prison, and Joseph’s words reveal the heart and thoughts of Joseph. They remind us that Joseph wasn’t super-human. He was hoping to get out of prison as soon as possible.
4. Joseph suffered greatly when he was falsely accused by Potiphar’s wife, and naturally he was eager to be released from the dungeon.
5. After interpreting the butler’s dream, the chief baker’s dream was next (40:16, 17).
6. Undoubtedly the baker was very hopeful and excited by Joseph’s favorable interpretation of the butler’s dream, and he probably expected a similar happy ending to his imprisonment.
7. Joseph told the baker quite frankly that a very different outcome awaited him (40:18, 19). Once again we are reminded of Joseph’s honesty and integrity. It took courage for Joseph to “give it to him straight.”
8. Joseph would never compromise or deviate from the pathway of truth. Other men would be less forthright, but not Joseph.
9. “That which God revealed to him he passed on to the chief baker without addition or subtraction” (Thomas, *Genesis*).
10. Joseph’s interpretation of the dreams was correct and on the third day everything happened exactly as Joseph predicted (40:20-22).

11. So Joseph waited patiently for the butler to help get him released from prison. But Genesis 40 ends with these sad words, "Yet did not the chief butler remember Joseph, but forgot him" (40:23).
12. Genesis 41:1 tells us Joseph had to wait an additional two years.
13. But Joseph did not lose faith. Joseph did not get bitter. These two years of quiet endurance in prison helped to make Joseph the great leader he went on to become.
14. James 1:4 says, "Let patience have her perfect work that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing."
15. God's way is wisest; God's timing is best; and God's grace is sufficient.
16. The poet said:

*Pain's furnace heat within me quivers,*

*God's breath upon the flame doth blow,*

*And all my heart in anguish shivers*

*And trembles at the fiery glow.*

*And yet I whisper, 'As God will!'*

*And in His hottest fire hold still.*

*He comes and lays my heart, all heated,*

*On the hard anvil, minded so*

*Into His own fair shape to beat it*

*With his great hammer, blow on blow!*

*And yet I whisper 'As God will!'*

*And at His heaviest blows hold still.*

*He takes my softened heart, and beats it;*

*The sparks fly off at every blow.*

*He turns it o'er and o'er, and heats it,*

*And lets it cool, and makes it glow.*

*And yet I whisper, 'As God will!'*

*And in His mighty hand hold still.*

*Why should I murmur? for the sorrow*

*Thus only longer-lived would be;*

*Its end may come, and will, tomorrow,*

*When God has done His work in me.*

*So I say, trusting, 'As God will!'*

*And, trusting to the end, hold still.*

*He kindles for my profit purely*

*Affliction's fiery, glowing brand;*

*And all His heaviest blows are surely*

*Inflicted by a Master-hand.*

*So I say, praying, 'As God will!'*

*And hope in Him, and suffer still."* Julius K. R. Sturm, "God's Anvil"

It must have difficult for Joseph, waiting those two long years in that dismal, gloomy dungeon. But like the poet, Joseph could say, "And yet I whisper, 'As God will!' And in His mighty hand hold still."

17. Another poet said, "*Let us press on, in patient self-denial, Accept the hardship, shrink not from the loss: Our portion lies beyond the hour of trial, Our crown beyond the cross*" (W. H. Burleigh).

18. Joseph's character was strengthened in prison.

19. Helen Keller was born in 1880 in Alabama. She was born with the ability to see and hear, but at the age of 19 months old, she contracted an illness which left her both deaf and blind.

20. She went on to become a world-famous speaker and author, and advocate for people with disabilities. She said, "Character cannot be

developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, ambition inspired, and success achieved.”

21. If a worldly, unregenerate woman can recognize that, how much more can a godly man like Joseph!
22. The prophet Jeremiah said, “It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth” (Lamentations 3:27).
23. Remember that Joseph was Jacob’s favorite son. Jacob was an indulgent father, and he spoiled Joseph. His brothers knew this and they were very jealous. Joseph had a soft life...until he was sold into slavery and wound up in prison.
24. Those two years of waiting in prison had the effect of maturing and steadying Joseph’s character. It prepared him to stand confidently before Pharaoh with dignity and poise.
25. W.H. Griffith Thomas said, “If only we take care of our character, God will take care of our interests and reputation. Daily faithfulness in ordinary duties is the very best preparation for future service. Joseph found plenty of work to do and was enabled to bear his own sorrows and troubles in ministering to the needs of others. These two years were in some respects the most vital and critical in his life. The deeper the foundation, the more durable the building; and in these two years the foundations of his future influence were laid deep and strong” (*Genesis*).
26. While Joseph patiently waited in prison, God was working His purpose out. We know from the things Joseph said to his brothers afterwards that eventually Joseph fully understood that God’s time of deliverance was by far the best.

### **CONCLUSION:**

1. Notice Joseph’s emphasis on God (45:5, 7, 8, 9). Joseph saw God’s hand in all of his trials and troubles (cf. 50:20).
2. God is never before His time, and God is never behind. God is always right on time. “The clock of Divine providence keeps strict time, and has never been known to vary either in one direction or the other” (Thomas).
3. Joseph had to wait two more years in prison. He said to the chief butler, “But think on me when it shall be well with thee...” (40:14), but the butler “forgot him” (40:23).

4. Eighteen hundred years later, a dying thief said to Jesus, “Lord remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom,” but Jesus did not forget him.
5. He said to him, “Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:42, 43).