

# WAITING IN THE PIT

SERIES: THE STORY OF JOSEPH



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Genesis 40:1-23  
Fifth Message  
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*Genesis 40:1-23*

I want to start with a little experiment. Wherever you are right now, I want you to do nothing. (Silence for 10 seconds.)

That time was ten seconds. Ten seconds of waiting. It was uncomfortable, right? We live in a culture that hates to wait. We always want to be doing, always active, always onto the next thing. What do you do when there's nothing to do? What do you do when you have to wait?

This morning we're continuing our series in the life of Joseph. We've met Joseph, and we've seen his dreams. Two weeks ago we took a detour to watch Judah, Joseph's brother, fail but be redeemed. Last week we saw Joseph be falsely accused of sexual assault and thrown into prison.

Today, our story opens with Joseph in the pit. One commentator calls it his third pit. First, he is thrown into a dry cistern; then, he is sold into slavery. Now he is in prison. This morning we will watch as Joseph is given a glimmer of hope that things might actually change. But then that glimmer will fade. Nothing will happen. We will see Joseph waiting in the pit.

Remember that Joseph has promises that God that something will come of his life. But for now, he waits in the pit. There is nothing in his circumstances that make it seem like God's promises will come true.

We've been waiting for things to "get back to normal" for almost a year. We've all experienced loss and trauma over the course of this pandemic. But even apart from our health crisis, we often find ourselves waiting.

How do we wait when nothing around us seems to offer any hope. When we have prayed, and we are waiting for God to act? When we desperately want our circumstances to change? Maybe Joseph's story can help us in our waiting.

## The Setting

Before we get to our passage for the morning, we need to remember one phrase from last week. Even

though Joseph is in prison—even though this is the lowest point of his life—we are told something very important in Genesis 39:21, "But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love."

This is the truth that hangs over the whole situation that we'll see unfold this morning. Joseph needs to remember this. We need to remember this. Let's start with the setting for our action this morning.

### Genesis 40:1-4:

**Some time after this, the cupbearer of the king of Egypt and his baker committed an offense against their lord the king of Egypt. 2 And Pharaoh was angry with his two officers, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker, 3 and he put them in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, in the prison where Joseph was confined. 4 The captain of the guard appointed Joseph to be with them, and he attended them. They continued for some time in custody.**

Joseph has been in prison for "some time." We don't know exactly how long that is, but it's probably several years. While he's there, two very important people join him.

The king's cupbearer would be responsible for tasting Pharaoh's wine to make sure it isn't poisoned. The baker would be responsible for the king's food. In ancient times, a king was always vulnerable to assassination or overthrow. The cupbearer and baker were two of the closest servants to the king. They had to be trusted. Any failure or betrayal would be deadly.

The two men are imprisoned for an offence or "sin" that isn't specified, and Joseph is made their servant. Once again, Joseph is serving important people. From Potiphar to servants of the king, Joseph always seems to find himself in the vicinity of power. Once again we are told that "some time" passes. This is not a short-term assignment.

This is the setting of Joseph's waiting. I'd like to invite you to think about your life. Where are you? Who is with you? What are you waiting for? What is the setting for God's story in your life?

Do you realize everything that happens to you is part of the setting for God's story in your life? All the good. All the bad. All the joys. All the suffering. If you are a follower of Jesus, God is writing your story to bring about his purposes.

My story took me from growing up in Connecticut to attending high school in Texas to college at Stanford. I worked in tech for seven years; now I get to preach the gospel in the middle of Silicon Valley. I see how God has worked out of the raw ingredients of my story for his purposes.

While everything in our lives is part of God's story, I've found that it's often the pain we've suffered, which God tends to use in particular ways. So if you find yourself in a pit, maybe God is preparing you for something. That is certainly true for Joseph.

## **An opportunity**

After some time serving the cupbearer and baker, Joseph has an opportunity.

### **Genesis 40:5-8:**

**And one night they both dreamed—the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt, who were confined in the prison—each his own dream, and each dream with its own interpretation. 6 When Joseph came to them in the morning, he saw that they were troubled. 7 So he asked Pharaoh's officers who were with him in custody in his master's house, "Why are your faces downcast today?" 8 They said to him, "We have had dreams, and there is no one to interpret them." And Joseph said to them, "Do not interpretations belong to God? Please tell them to me."**

Joseph has been developing a relationship with the cupbearer and baker. He's been with them for "some time". The Old Testament is full of stories of God's servants becoming close to powerful people. Moses in Pharaoh's court; Daniel in Nebuchadnezzar's palace; Nehemiah was the cupbearer for King Artaxerxes.

Joseph knew the cupbearer and the baker well enough that he could tell when they were upset. In fact, he asks them the same question that the King would later ask Nehemiah, "Why is your face downcast today?"

Then we learn about two dreams. Joseph had two dreams earlier in the story. Next week we'll hear about Pharaoh's two dreams. It seems that pairs of dreams are a theme of Joseph's story.

In ancient times, the interpreting of dreams was a skilled occupation. It was something you studied for. You learned methods and trained under experienced interpreters. That's why they say "there is no one to interpret [the dreams]." They are in prison. They don't have access to those people.

Joseph isn't trained or educated, but he knows the God who gives dreams. When he hears of the men's dreams, he implies that he has a special connection to the giver of dreams.

What do you think Joseph was thinking at this point? He's in prison. He trusts that God will do something. Now, these important people come to him with their dreams. If I were him, I'd wonder, "Is this it?" "Is this where God shows up to save me?" "Is this my chance?"

Have you ever had something happen, and you wonder what it means? Is this where God shows up? How do we know God is working? How do we know if this is the way God will show himself? Sometimes it just takes time. Usually, we have to watch and wait.

I've talked with several couples who are trying to get pregnant, but it keeps not happening. It's such a difficult process—every month wondering if this will be the time, only to be disappointed again and again. After a while, you get numb to the waiting. The hoping itself is painful because you've been let down so many times.

How do you keep waiting over the long haul? How do you handle glimmers of hope and times of discouragement? How does Joseph?

## **A good dream**

At first, things are looking good. The first dream has an incredible interpretation.

## Genesis 40:9-15:

**So the chief cupbearer told his dream to Joseph and said to him, "In my dream there was a vine before me, 10 and on the vine there were three branches. As soon as it budded, its blossoms shot forth, and the clusters ripened into grapes. 11 Pharaoh's cup was in my hand, and I took the grapes and pressed them into Pharaoh's cup and placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand." 12 Then Joseph said to him, "This is its interpretation: the three branches are three days. 13 In three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your office, and you shall place Pharaoh's cup in his hand as formerly, when you were his cupbearer. 14 Only remember me, when it is well with you, and please do me the kindness to mention me to Pharaoh, and so get me out of this house. 15 For I was indeed stolen out of the land of the Hebrews, and here also I have done nothing that they should put me into the pit."**

The cupbearer's dream is itself a literary work of art. Four different sets of three characterize his dream. Three branches appear. Three stages of growth: budding, blossoming, and ripening. Three actions from the cupbearer: taking the grapes, pressing them, placing the cup in Pharaoh's hand. And three mentions of this important cup.

It's a dream which shows the cupbearer doing his job again. In fact, he's doing more than his job. He's not just serving, but he's harvesting the grapes and making the wine. Joseph gives the cupbearer a very positive interpretation. Pharaoh will "lift up his head" and restore him to his office. This is the best possible outcome for the cupbearer.

Joseph sees a chance. He has brought very good news to a man in a position of power. Maybe this could be his chance. "Maybe this is how I'll be saved." So he makes a request. His request ends with a plea for sympathy. The last word is "pit" which Joseph uses to refer to the prison and connect with all of his suffering so far.

Joseph asks two things of the cupbearer: "only remember me" and "please do me the kindness."

Now, these are interesting words that Joseph uses. So far in Genesis, God is the one who has been "remembering" people. We read that "God remembered

Noah" (Genesis 8:1). "God remembers his covenant" (Genesis 9:15). "God remembered Abraham" (Genesis 19:29). "God remembered Rachel" (Genesis 30:22).

God is also typically the one who shows kindness. This is the Hebrew word "*chesed*"—what the King James version of the Bible translates as "lovingkindness." It's one of the main attributes of God—the Old Testament version of agape love.

So Joseph asks the cupbearer to remember him and show him *chesed*. 19:29).

One of the powerful parts of narrative is that it invites us to wonder about the characters. In any story, we are only told a fraction of what is going on, and we fill in the rest. Sometimes the way we fill in the gaps tells us more about ourselves than the characters in the story.

As I look at Joseph, I'm wondering, What was he looking for from this cupbearer? He's used language that is often ascribed to God. I wonder whether he's putting the cupbearer in place of God. Does Joseph want this man to save him? Is he putting his faith in him instead of God?

Here's the definitive answer: I don't know. I don't know Joseph's heart. We aren't told enough to know.

But I know my own heart. I know that if I were in that situation—if those were my words—I'd be desperate to get out of prison. I would want the cupbearer to remember me. I would want him to show me *chesed*. I would want him to save me.

What about you? Do you resonate with that? Maybe I'm the only one. When you're waiting in the pit, who do you look to for salvation?

I look to my spouse, my children, my friends. I look to you. It's so tempting to look to the people or circumstances around us as our salvation. If I were Joseph, I'd be giddy. I'd immediately assume that this man was going to save me.

Do you know what has been one of the most powerful forces of spiritual transformation in my life? Disappointment. It hasn't been great sermons or great books or great ideas. It's been when I've looked to others to save me. I've put my hope in the wrong things.

Inevitably those things disappoint me. It's what the New Testament refers to as idolatry. We look for salvation in the wrong things. When they disappoint us, God is there. That disappointment is the mercy of God to point us to Jesus. In my disappointment, I turn to God.

Maybe Joseph is too excited about the cupbearer, or maybe he isn't. If he is, he will be disappointed, and God will use his disappointment.

## A bad dream

The interpretation of dreams started well for Joseph, but the next dream is not nearly so positive.

### Genesis 40:16-19:

**When the chief baker saw that the interpretation was favorable, he said to Joseph, "I also had a dream: there were three cake baskets on my head, 17 and in the uppermost basket there were all sorts of baked food for Pharaoh, but the birds were eating it out of the basket on my head." 18 And Joseph answered and said, "This is its interpretation: the three baskets are three days. 19 In three days Pharaoh will lift up your head—from you!—and hang you on a tree. And the birds will eat the flesh from you."**

The baker saw the cupbearer's good dream, and that inspired him to share his own dream. What a setup for disappointment. This dream also begins with sets of three: there were three cake baskets. But that's the only one.

Incidentally, the Egyptians were apparently very good at making bread. Records discovered by archaeologists mention 38 different kinds of cake and 57 varieties of bread. Those Egyptians liked their carbs. So the baker has three baskets full of different types of bread.

Then the dream and the interpretation turn sour. The way it is told is masterful. The dreams begin the same way, with sets of three. The baker is hoping for the same kind of interpretation as the cupbearer. Joseph begins his interpretation with the exact same words: "In three days Pharaoh will lift up your head."

It seems a bit cruel. It sounds like Joseph is going to give the same kind of report. But then there's a wordplay. The phrase "lift up your head" is almost always used

in a positive sense throughout the Old Testament. Joseph begins that way before changing direction. The baker's head will be lifted up and hung—a very different outcome.

These two dreams bring one of the major themes of Joseph's story into focus. This story bounces between extravagant prosperity and horrible tragedy. Joseph gets a coat of authority which gets him sold into slavery. He has a great job but is falsely accused and thrown into prison. Now he encounters two dreams—one of restoration and the other of execution. Next week, we'll see Pharaoh's parallel dreams of feast and famine.

What are we to make of this? This flip-flopping and pendulum swinging of the story? Prosperity and tragedy side by side and hand in hand?

Last weekend my wife and I drove to Half Moon Bay. We sat in our car, looking at the ocean as it churned with massive waves. It was beautiful and majestic—such a powerful reminder of God's power and goodness. I felt grateful to God and at peace.

But then I walked to the bathroom and saw a notice for a 12-year-old boy who had been swept away by these waves. "Missing at Sea," it said. My heart sunk. I had heard that story—maybe you have too—of a family who lost their son in a surprise wave. I can't even imagine losing a child in that way.

Those same waves—beauty and power, but deadly and dangerous. Two dreams—one of restoration and another of execution. What do we do with the parallel of prosperity and tragedy?

I believe we are to recognize that God is sovereign throughout these swings. The God of Jesus, of the one who died and rose again, is a God who reigns through ups and downs. Our God is not overly impressed by prosperity, nor is he discouraged by tragedy. Each of them serves his purposes in different ways.

But the work of God is not merely a pendulum. Life doesn't bounce between good and bad. History isn't some kind of cosmic pendulum. In the biblical story, tragedy always gives way to prosperity. They are both parts of God's plan, but the story always ends in victory.

In fact, all the little stories within Joseph's story begin with prosperity and end with tragedy; Joseph's coat of slavery; the job to prison; the dream of restoration and the dream of execution.

Joseph's story begins with tragedy and ends with prosperity. The world decays, but God redeems. The world decays. But God redeems. He is sovereign in the waves when they are awesome and when they are deadly. But his purposes always move toward good.

As our story this morning ends, Joseph will need to remember this.

## Forgotten again

### Genesis 40:20-23:

**On the third day, which was Pharaoh's birthday, he made a feast for all his servants and lifted up the head of the chief cupbearer and the head of the chief baker among his servants. 21 He restored the chief cupbearer to his position, and he placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand. 22 But he hanged the chief baker, as Joseph had interpreted to them. 23 Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him.**

Two things happen here. First, Joseph's interpretations prove to be reliable. The third day comes, and Pharaoh does indeed "lift up the head" of both the cupbearer and the baker. The cupbearer is restored and the baker is hanged.

The last verse is the haunting one: "the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him." That kind of repetition is a Hebrew method of emphasis. He did not remember, and he forgot.

I wonder how long Joseph waited before realizing that he had been forgotten. The cupbearer went back to his job, and then Joseph waited. And waited. When nothing happened, he finally realized that the cupbearer wasn't going to return the favor. Joseph thought that this might be his chance, but it wasn't. He was forgotten. Again.

So what do we do in the pit? We wait. We wait in the pit.

We know the end of Joseph's story. We know that eventually he will be remembered. But Joseph doesn't know that yet. For now, he simply waits.

How do you do that? How do you wait for God when you don't know whether to hope for prosperity or fear

tragedy? How do you trust in a God who makes waves that can calm my soul but also steal a child? How do you trust God in the pit waiting for you know not what?

But maybe a better question is how do you not wait for God? How do you not trust him? Is the alternative any better? Is it better to conclude that you have been forgotten?

Our faith in Jesus gives us hope. We have seen him rise from the pit and so we know that we will not be forgotten. Like Joseph, there are times when we wait in the pit. But we never wait without hope. The biblical story may take us through prosperity and tragedy. But it always ends with victory.

## Conclusion

At the end of the last chapter, we were reminded that "the LORD was with Joseph." In our story this morning, we have seen how God was with him, even as he seemed to be forgotten. Joseph waited for years, convinced that he was forgotten and alone.

Joseph was not the only biblical character to be forgotten. Centuries later, Jesus would ask his Father, "Why have you forsaken me?" But the night before that question, he would give his followers a ceremony so that they would not forget him. He would help them to remember.

That tradition involved some bread and some wine. In a sense, Jesus becomes the baker and the cupbearer for us. Over the next few days, he would experience his head being lifted up. First to execution, then in resurrection. He would endure the greatest tragedy, but it would give way to the most extravagant prosperity.

When Jesus first served his followers, he said these words from Matthew 26:27-29:

"Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."

The bread and the wine are given to us for our waiting. We are waiting for the Father's kingdom. We are waiting for that day when we will sit down with Jesus at his wedding feast. We are waiting for the day when all tragedy gives way to prosperity.

We have the bread and the cup to sustain us in our waiting. We have Jesus. He died in tragedy and rose in prosperity so that we could follow the same path. We die to sin with him so that we can be raised to a new life.

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