

JOSEPH, - FROM PIT TO PRIME MINISTER (VOLUME 1)

Introduction

As we begin a detailed study of the Life of Joseph in the book of Genesis there are two important areas we need to consider as essential background information.

a. Joseph's family background

In many ways Joseph's home life was far from ideal, and there were a number of sad failures that he was exposed to from the day he was born. His father was Jacob, and his name means '*deceiver*' (Genesis 25:26); literally '*one who grasps the heel*', and meaning someone who outwits another by craft, such as a wrestler may catch his opponent's heel to trip him up. Jacob was given this name because that is what he was. He deceived both his father Isaac and his brother Esau, and tricked Isaac into thinking he was his brother so that Isaac gave him his blessing instead of Esau, his firstborn (Genesis 27). Later the Lord changed his name to '*Israel*' after he had wrestled with the Lord and prevailed, recorded in Genesis 32:22ff. Israel means '*he struggles with God*' or '*God strives*'.

Sadly the home Joseph was born into was not a happy place. His father's two wives, Leah and Rachel, were jealous of each other. Genesis 30:1&7 speak of the struggle there was between these two women. Although Jacob loved Rachel and served her father Laban seven years for her, Laban tricked him at the last minute and gave him Rachel's older sister Leah for his wife instead. Jacob

promised to work another seven years and Laban then gave him Rachel because of that promise. So Jacob's was a bigamous marriage, as were so many in those early days, and certainly not the ideal situation as instituted by God at creation (Genesis 2:24). The result was constant rivalry between these two women and many unkind words were spoken (see Genesis 30:14-15 as an example). To make matters worse there is no record in the Bible of Jacob intervening to stop this bickering. All this must have made the home atmosphere very tense at times, and was a very bad example to set before Jacob's children and was something which was to repeat itself later in his other sons' attitude towards Joseph.

Jacob had twelve sons in all, the youngest being Benjamin, and next to him was Joseph. Joseph's birth took place in Haran and is recorded in Genesis 30:22-24. His name means '*may he add*' which reflected his mother Rachel's desire that God would give her another son, which he did when Benjamin was born some time later. But prior to that, Jacob and his family left Laban in Haran and travelled to Canaan, the land promised to Abraham by God. They eventually came to the city of Shechem when a tragedy occurred. Jacob's daughter Dinah was raped by a man named Shechem (Genesis 34:1-2). Jacob acted in a very weak way. He did nothing about it, and did not even challenge the man. When Dinah's brothers learned what had happened they went to avenge their sister by murdering the men in Shechem's family. They did this in a deceitful way (Genesis 34:13f), just as their father had acted previously. There is an old proverb which states,

'like father like son', and that was certainly the case here. Joseph's brothers rightly refused any idea of a mixed marriage between Israel, the people of God, and this pagan people in Shechem, but they then used guile to lure the men into a trap which would lead to their extermination. They deceitfully promised a marriage arrangement as long as all the men of Shechem submitted to the covenant sign of circumcision. While the men were in pain and recovering from this, Joseph's brothers killed them. After this massacre all Jacob could think of was himself and what difficulties this would bring to him (Genesis 34:30). He was more concerned with his own peace than with honour. What was required was strong moral leadership from Jacob, but that was entirely lacking. Jacob seems to have been very indecisive at times.

It was after this that Rachel gave birth to Joseph's younger brother Benjamin, but sadly their mother died while giving birth (Genesis 35:16ff). So quite early in life Joseph suffered the tragedy of losing his mother, and Jacob lost the wife he loved dearly.

It must be said that Jacob does not seem to have led his family with any firmness or loving discipline. When his firstborn son Reuben committed incest by sleeping with his father's concubine (Genesis 35:22), his father heard about it but said nothing until he was on his deathbed (see Genesis 49:3-4) when he spoke words of scathing judgment. He should have rebuked and disciplined his son at the time of his sin, but the Biblical narrative has a conspicuous silence at this point. No doubt this event caused Jacob great grief and sadness, which he carried until

his deathbed, and it eventually meant that Reuben lost his birthright.

So this was the troubled environment in which Joseph was brought up, and we need briefly to mention one further thing. Joseph's birth was a double joy for Jacob because Rachel had been childless up to this point. This was a great stigma and disgrace in her culture. Indeed, her rivalry with Leah was mainly over childbearing, so the delight Joseph's birth brought was very real. Alongside this, Joseph was a child of Jacob's old age (Genesis 37:3). This resulted in Jacob loving Joseph and favouring him above all his other sons, a very unwise thing to do, and something which contributed to the resentment with which his brothers viewed Joseph. So from the human point of view this was not the best start for young Joseph. This leads us to the second area of background information we must consider.

b. The purposes of God

After all that we have just mentioned we could feel very discouraged. However, that would be to leave God out of the equation, which is always an unwise thing to do. Whilst not condoning the failings of his father and brothers in any way, we shall discover the Lord was still able to bring good out of a much less than perfect situation. We need to remember that God had revealed to Joseph's great-grandfather Abraham his tremendous purpose to bring a nation into being through his descendants, which we now know as Israel, and ultimately to bring blessing to the world through them with the eventual coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. Included in this was even the declaration to Abraham in Genesis 15:13 that his descendants would be

strangers in a foreign land (ie. Egypt). God also told Abraham his descendants would become slaves there for 400 years before coming out to possess their own land, Canaan. Therefore, there was the need for God sovereignly to work in order to bring this about. He would need not only to bring his people into being, but also protect and preserve them so that his great purposes would be fulfilled. And although what we have seen indicates that Joseph and his family were on a very shaky and unstable and unfavourable foundation from the human perspective, we will also see God worked through all the twists and turns of Joseph's life to bring these great purposes to fruition, which he accomplished through Joseph by bringing him to Egypt. Indeed, Joseph's life is a very important link in the chain that would eventually lead to the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world, because through him Jacob's family was preserved, and that included Joseph's brother Judah, into whose family line the Lord Jesus was eventually born (see Matthew 1:2-3, Luke 3:33-34).

At this particular point in Joseph's life, as we have considered the unfavourable home life he experienced, we might not be convinced that God was at work. Indeed, as we shall see, much worse was to befall Joseph, but God was sovereignly working his purposes out behind every scene and tragedy and difficulty Joseph had to face.

The sovereign ways of God have been helpfully expressed by the Christian hymn writer William Cowper. He wrote this:

“God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform:

he plants his footsteps in the sea, and rides upon the storm.

*Deep in unfathomable mines of never failing skill
he treasures up his bright designs, and works his
sovereign will.*

*Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take; the clouds you so
much dread
are big with mercy, and shall break in blessings on
your head.*

***Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust him for
his grace;***

***behind a frowning providence he hides a smiling
face.***

*His purposes will ripen fast, unfolding every hour;
the bud may have a bitter taste, but sweet will be the
flower.*

*Blind unbelief is sure to err, and scan his work in vain;
God is his own interpreter, and he will make it plain.”*

This is something we shall see unfolding as we look through Joseph's life together. And what was true in Joseph's life is true in the lives of every Christian believer. The Psalmist described it like this in Psalm 31:15 *“My times are in your hands...”* Although at this present time you may be going through extreme difficulties, and everything may appear to be going against you, and perhaps people are being unkind and acting unjustly towards you, if you are a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ

then God has you and all these things in his hand and is at work to make all these trials work together for your good. This is the great overriding lesson the Biblical teaching on the life of Joseph presents to us. The Christian believer need not despair, or be discouraged. Instead, the life of Joseph helps us to hope in God, for we will yet praise him for his goodness to us. The Psalmist helps us here because this is exactly what he did when his own difficulties overwhelmed him (Psalm 42:5): *“Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why are you disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, My Saviour and my God.”*

Chapter 1 Genesis 37:1-36 Joseph loved and hated at home

We saw in our general introduction that Joseph was born into a somewhat turbulent family, but we do not have any direct information about Joseph himself throughout his childhood and early teens. We know that his father Jacob lived a semi-nomadic lifestyle, and his family journeyed with him from Haran to the land of Canaan. But Joseph is introduced to us in quite a striking way in verse 2. We are told, *‘This is the account of Jacob’*, and immediately Joseph is mentioned. This is done quite deliberately by God to draw our attention to the importance of Joseph amongst the twelve sons of Jacob. In fact, these first full details we are given about his life begin when he was aged seventeen (Genesis 37:2). As the chapter unfolds we are given a series of events that are like a downward staircase that gets lower and lower with each step. And by this we

are referring to the low opinion Joseph’s brothers had of him.

1) Joseph reported his brothers’ bad behaviour to their father (v2).

Joseph was learning the life of a shepherd, and as a seventeen-year-old youngster he was sent out to pasture and care for the flocks of his father. Possibly because of his youth he was not sent out alone, but with his brothers, and four of them in particular are singled out for our attention. They are described as *“...the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father’s wives...”* These were Dan and Naphtali the sons of Bilhah (Genesis 35:25), and Gad and Asher the sons of Zilpah (Genesis 35:26). Although we are not given the details, something was wrong with the way these four brothers were behaving. Had they been cruel to the animals, or been lazy, or said some unkind things about their parents, or something else? As we are not told, it would be unwise to speculate. However, Joseph gave this bad report about them to their father. Interestingly, later on when the Levitical law was given by Moses we are told in Leviticus 5:1 that failure to speak up about something wrong that has been heard or seen was to make the one who was silent guilty of sin and responsible. Whether this was what governed Joseph’s behaviour or not is again difficult to say, but one thing is certain - this was certainly not going to endear him to his brothers! Several scholars think that Joseph was displaying pride by his behaviour, and others that he should have challenged his brothers directly first to try to gain their repentance.

However, that did not happen, and Joseph reported things to his father. This is the first downward step.

2) Joseph was his father's favourite (v3).

The second downward step recorded for us concerned Joseph's father Jacob. His father made Joseph his favourite son. Indeed he loved him "...*more than any of his other sons...*" and the reason we are given is that Joseph was born when Jacob was old, and so perhaps understandably the boy had special significance for him. We must say, however, that this was a very unwise thing. He should have loved all his sons equally and not elevated Joseph above the others. This also shows some inconsistency in Jacob because Benjamin was born after Joseph and was therefore a child of Jacob's more advanced age, so why was he not loved in this way? We also have to say that Jacob had known from earlier experience that to have a favourite was a cause of very painful unhappiness. In his own parental home when his father Isaac favoured his brother Esau it led to tensions between him and Jacob. Then in Jacob's own home, he loved his wife Rachel more than his first wife Leah, with the result that there was constant friction and jealousy in the home between these two women. Surely he should have learned from this! But he seems to have failed to grasp the lesson. But before we are too quick to accuse Jacob we must also acknowledge that we ourselves can be slow to learn from our own experiences! This highlights our need to seek the Lord's help to learn from our own experiences, especially from our mistakes or unwise actions. Returning to Jacob we must say that making Joseph his favourite was something

that was guaranteed to breed resentment from his other sons. He made matters worse by giving Joseph a lavish robe to wear that marked him out for everyone to see. This garment is described in a variety of ways by our Bible translators - a coat of many colours, a richly ornamented robe, a long coat with sleeves such as a nobleman would wear, a varicoloured tunic. Clearly it was something of exceptional quality, and very noticeable. It would not have been so bad if Jacob had kept his strong affection for the lad to himself, but to display it so openly in this way was to drive a wedge between Joseph and his brothers, and his brothers and their father. And this was exactly what followed.

3) Joseph's brothers despised him (v4).

There was no hiding the reaction of Jacob's other sons to his unwise action (Genesis 37:4): "*When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him.*" It was not that they simply resented their father's over indulgence with regard to Joseph, it was far worse, for they hated their brother, and this was nothing short of a tragedy. (See 1 John 3:15 for God's assessment of their resentment.) It was so severe that they could not speak a kind word to him. Their hatred was almost at bursting point, and no doubt had resulted from watching their father spoil Joseph throughout these seventeen years of his life, and that coat was just one step too far.

Their hostility and malice meant that for Joseph things were going from bad to worse, for it was not just the four brothers who had behaved wrongly who envied him, but all

of them! We can easily imagine their thoughts. ‘Why doesn’t our father give us fine clothes? Why should he be singled out and we are neglected? Such a coat is not a working man’s clothes, so why should Joseph not be expected to work as hard as we do?’ Joseph was becoming increasingly isolated in his own family. These men should have recognised the evil in their own hearts and have acted to subdue it, but they failed. And the trouble with sin that is harboured in our hearts is that it increases, as the narrative shows. Hatred is like a spreading cancer in the soul. Hatred removes any pity that may have been felt for its victim, and distorts the judgment of those guilty of it. Therefore decisive and radical action needs to be taken when such ungodly thoughts arise in our minds against another. How wise are Paul’s words to the Ephesian believers in this respect (Ephesians 4:30-31): *“Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”* Note those words *“Get rid of...”* There is no room for compromise or the accommodation of such evil desires, and failure to do this will reap very costly and tragic results. Remember the words of Galatians 6:7-10, *“Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all*

people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.” This wise instruction was sadly not something that characterised Jacob’s sons, and the result was that as time passed their hatred of Joseph increased, and they did evil instead of doing good.

One cannot help but think of the clear parallels here with the way the Lord Jesus Christ was treated during the years of his ministry. His own brothers were opposed to him at one time. In Mark 3:21 they said about him that, *“He is out of his mind.”* In John 7:5 we read that, *“...even his own brothers did not believe him.”* Thankfully they eventually changed their minds about Jesus. In Acts 1:14 the apostles were joined in prayer by the Lord’s brothers, and we read of James the Lord’s brother in Galatians 1:19. This happy result did not occur in everyone who initially despised him. This was especially seen in the Jewish leaders and teachers, the Pharisees and Sadducees, because they increased in their opposition to him until they crucified him. How accurate is John’s description when he wrote about Jesus that he came to his own, but his own did not receive him (John 1:11), and their hatred of him grew and grew with the passing of time until they murdered him. Therefore, how we need to search and guard our own hearts against such evil desires!

One thing further needs to be noted about this sad situation in Joseph’s family, and it is this: we do not find any record in the Bible of his father Jacob intervening to correct this situation as he should have done. So in many ways this was a double failure in Jacob. This is not to be unkind to Jacob, because every parent is conscious of having made

mistakes with their children, but it is something we can learn from for our own lives. Our children need to be lovingly disciplined and corrected when they behave in a wrong way. This is exactly what God does to Christian believers because they are his children. (See Hebrews 12:3-11.)

4) Joseph's dreams (v5-11).

The next downward step as far as the relationship between Joseph and his brothers is concerned, came as a result of two extraordinary dreams that he had and which he related to the rest of his family. Before we consider what Joseph dreamt it is important for us to say some cautionary things about dreams. The Old Testament does not have a great deal of instruction about dreams: in fact they were very rare vehicles of divine revelation. It teaches us that dreams can come from various sources. There is an interesting phrase in Ecclesiastes 5:3, "...a dream comes when there are many cares..." and most of us can identify with that when we have been burdened with various cares. Our sleep is often disturbed and we dream, and no doubt most dreams come from that source, so we must be very careful not to fall into the trap of thinking every dream we have has some meaning that God is trying to communicate to us, say for example, concerning the future. There are some people today who try to find some meaning in every dream they have, and that is quite unbiblical. Really very few dreams are recorded in the Bible as having spiritual significance, and those that are were on very notable occasions in the purposes of God. In addition to that we need to remember that these dreams came when the Bible

was incomplete, but now we have God's revelation in full. The Bible, which is the Word of God, is complete and cannot and must not be added to; so as far as we are concerned it is here that we must look for the Lord's instruction and guidance in our lives. Having made that cautionary comment we must say that the Bible does instruct us that on rare occasions messages from God did come in this way. And interestingly this can be experienced by believers and unbelievers. e.g. Think of the dreams of the Midianites in the days of Gideon (Judges 7:13), or those that disturbed Nebuchadnezzar in the book of Daniel. Also, Solomon was spoken to by God in a dream in 1 Kings 3:5. And so it is that we are told Joseph received two dreams of important significance.

a. Concerning his brothers' sheaves which bowed down to his (v5-8).

In his first dream Joseph and his brothers were binding up sheaves of corn, when suddenly his stood upright, and those of his brothers gathered around his and bowed down to it. Joseph acted somewhat naively because he related his dream to his brothers. This was bound to incite them to further anger against him, but he did so with some enthusiasm because he said in verse 6, "*Listen to this dream I had...*" How much Joseph understood about this dream at that time is hard to judge; at the very least he seems to be aware that in it he was superior to his brothers. We can say, because we have the full details of his life, that God had destined Joseph for high office, and was revealing this in this dream. He would in fact be brought to a very high position in order that he might show kindness to his

brothers, but this was not going to happen for many years in the future. However, his brothers had no hesitation in expressing their disgust and indignation over what they knew it to mean (Genesis 37:8): “*Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?*” And they protested most strongly that they would never bow down to their pampered brother. His brothers considered this dream came from the ambition and pride in Joseph’s heart. But they of course were just as proud as they thought their brother was because they considered it totally beneath them that they would come and bow down to Joseph. Little did they all know at that time how events were going to transpire many years later to bring this about in the providence of God, but at this stage it just added fuel to their burning hatred of their brother. Indeed we are told twice in a short space that they hated him even more (v5 & 8). This is one of the ways that God emphasises a point, here showing just how strongly they loathed their brother.

b. Concerning the sun, moon and stars bowing down to him (v9-11).

Joseph’s second dream concerned the sun, moon and eleven stars which all bowed down to him. This time Joseph told both his brothers and his father Jacob, and it does seem as if there may well have been pride in his heart as he related these dreams. Caution and discretion should have governed him, especially after his brothers’ reaction to his first dream, but unwisely he ignored that and spoke out. He began by saying in verse 9 “*Listen...*”, and it is a term that showed the dream pleased Joseph personally, so there does seem to have been some pride in the lad. This

time his father protested and rebuked him by saying in verse 10, “*What is this dream you had? Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you?*” His brothers despised him even more, and they were full of jealousy towards him (v11), but significantly Jacob did what Mary did many centuries later (see Luke 2:19), he pondered these things in his heart and thought much about it. It appears that Jacob recognised there was something unusual in Joseph’s dream and perhaps even acknowledged that God was saying something, although at this stage in the proceedings he did not know how this was going to be worked out. These dreams were certainly indicating Joseph’s supremacy over his brothers and his whole family, and that the two dreams were on the same theme was again God’s way of emphasising this was certain.

One little problem has troubled some over Jacob’s reference to Joseph’s mother in verse 10, because by then Rachel had already died. The problem can be resolved by one of two ways. First, Jacob was referring to Rachel because she was still very precious in Jacob’s memory. If this is right, then, as she could not literally bow down to Joseph as she was already dead, it indicates to us that not every detail in the dream was fulfilled literally, just as in the parables of Jesus where not every detail has significant meaning. Here Jacob was answering the general trend of the dream. Alternatively it could be answered by realising that upon Rachel’s death, Jacob’s other wife and Rachel’s sister Leah would have been considered the mother of the family.

5) Joseph's brothers' wicked scheme (v12ff)

a. Their wicked plan.

It is James who tells us that if sin is left unchecked it results in absolute disaster (James 1:13-15): *“When tempted, no-one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.”* We have already seen that Joseph's brothers had come to hate him in an increasing manner with the passing of time, and indeed it has been likened to a barrel of gunpowder that was ready to explode. Their sin increased, and things went from bad to worse. The events that now took place in Joseph's life show that gunpowder barrel erupting in a most serious and wicked way.

Jacob's other sons had gone to graze his flocks near Shechem, and so he sent Joseph to them to see if all was well (v12-13). Shechem was where their sister Dinah had been raped and where they had slaughtered the men and raided their property. No news had come from them and so Jacob was concerned. We must say, however, that in the circumstances to send Joseph was not the wisest thing to do as Jacob must have been aware of the tension between his sons. Either he was turning a blind eye to this and trying to convince himself there was no animosity between them, or what is more likely, Jacob did not realise how serious things were between Joseph and his other sons. Joseph obeyed his father but did not find them at Shechem. He

was told by a man that they had gone on to Dothan (v14-17), and Joseph dutifully continued to obey his father and went to search for them. And it is at this point that the narrative takes us into some dark and sinister details. His brothers saw Joseph at a distance and they plotted to kill him (v18-20). Their animosity towards him reached boiling point and all their stored up resentment was released like a devastating flash flood. With utter disdain they did not even mention his name, but described him as *‘that dreamer’*. So they plotted to kill him and throw him into one of the cisterns, which were large pits or underground caverns in which water was stored. Added to that they agreed to lie to their father about it, showing total disrespect for him. And their great aim was to frustrate utterly the implications of his dreams. They said, *“Then we’ll see what becomes of his dreams.”* How wicked they were, being just like Cain with Abel, and disregarding God's injunction given to Noah about the terrible seriousness of murder. God told Noah in Genesis 9:6, *“Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has man been made.”* Such an evil crime was a crime not just against the victim but also against God. Joseph's brothers' evil desires just grew and grew, and it resulted in their plan to murder him! What a solemn lesson this is of the danger of tolerating sin in our hearts. Here it was resentment which grew into hatred which grew into murder!

b. Reuben's timely intervention.

At the very moment when it seemed God's purposes for Joseph were to come to nothing and he was going to be

destroyed, Reuben intervened (v21-25a). He suggested that Joseph be thrown into a cistern and that they refrain from murdering him. His intention was to rescue Joseph some time later, but he realised that suggesting it to his angry brothers at that stage would not have gained their agreement. So when Joseph arrived they attacked him, and his beautiful coat was stripped from him. That garment had irritated them for so long and made them despise him. Then Joseph was thrown into the pit. Later on in Genesis we are told that Joseph was in deep distress at their actions and pleaded with them for his life, but they refused to listen to him (Genesis 42:21). Yet how marvellous is the sovereignty of God to bring Reuben to act at just the right time so that his life was spared! Another mercy of God's sovereignty was that the cistern was not full of water but empty, otherwise Joseph would have drowned. The Lord had not forsaken Joseph, however it may have looked to him, and whatever he may have felt.

As that day went on, astonishingly these brothers then sat down for a meal, as if nothing serious had taken place (v25)! How callous and indifferent these men were. We see here an instance of the incredible hardness of which the human heart is capable! Sin is a terrible thing. And tragically men have not changed for there is still hatred and hardness in many hearts. All of this directs us to the need of a Saviour to rescue us from our sin and to bring us the forgiveness of God. And how good to know that Almighty God has given us such a Saviour in the Lord Jesus Christ.

c. Joseph sold into slavery (v25f).

Reuben was not present with the brothers as they began their meal and may well have gone to do something with the flocks of sheep they were grazing. However, the remaining brothers saw a caravan of traders with their camels and goods. They carried spices, balm and myrrh which they were taking to Egypt. These commodities were used in cooking, medicine, embalming and beauty treatments. The traders are described as Ishmaelites and had come from Gilead which was a fertile area south east of the sea of Galilee and north of the Dead Sea (v25). It was then that Judah came up with an alternative plan, which would both save them from the charge of murder, and also get rid of their brother once and for all. He seems to have at least felt it wrong to kill one of his own family, his own flesh and blood. He suggested that Joseph be sold as a slave (v26-27), and all the brothers agreed. They sold Joseph for 20 shekels of silver and he was transported to Egypt.

It is interesting to note that the Ishmaelites were also called Midianites. The use of two different names for these traders has made some think that two different groups were involved, but that is not so. The answer is supplied in Judges 8:22-24 where the names are used interchangeably by Gideon to refer to the same people. The Midianites had been defeated and plundered and this plunder is described as having come from the Ishmaelites, the same people. A modern day example of the same thing is that someone might be called 'an Indian' or 'a Tamil,' or 'British' and 'English.' Two different descriptions are used for the same people.

We see again another parallel between Joseph and the Lord Jesus Christ because he was also sold for money. Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver (Matthew 26:14-16). Greed got the better of Judas and Joseph's brothers, and so we see them getting deeper and deeper into sin.

After Joseph had been taken by the traders Reuben returned and went to rescue his brother who was no longer in the cistern. He was filled with great alarm and tore his clothes (v29). This was a sign of great distress and sorrow, and no doubt he feared the worst. He immediately approached his brothers (v30), and said he did not know what to do. As the eldest brother he would be held responsible for Joseph by his father. But the brothers came up with another scheme (v31f). They tore Joseph's robe and killed a goat and dipped it in its blood, which they took to their father with the deliberate intention of deceiving him into thinking some animal had killed him. By so doing they were both dishonouring their father, and also taking their revenge on him for loving Joseph more than them. (NB. There's an irony here that it should be goat's blood, as this was the very meat Jacob had deceitfully prepared for his father and disguised as venison in order to get his father's blessing! Genesis 27:9.) So they added to their jealousy, hatred, and cruelty to Joseph, lying to their father. They fell deeper and deeper into sin and used one sin to try to overcome another. Knowing full well the robe was Joseph's they asked Jacob if it was his "...son's robe". We can see they still despised Joseph because they did not even use his name, just like the older son in the parable of

the prodigal son spoke to his father about his younger brother calling him "...*this son of yours...*" (see Luke 15:30ff).

Jacob fell into their trap and concluded some ferocious animal had killed his beloved Joseph (v33). Jacob's distress was immense and inconsolable. The child he loved above all others was taken from him, and assumed dead. He too tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and mourned for his son for a very long time. With total hypocrisy the sons, along with their sisters, tried to comfort him.

They knew full well it was all a pretence, but they were now in too deep, as it were, and they saw no other way out but to continue to lie. How sad this was. We are told in the book of Proverbs that lying is something God hates (Proverbs 12:22): "*The Lord detests lying lips, but he delights in men who are truthful.*" And in the Ten Commandments we are commanded not to lie (Exodus 20:16): "*You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour.*" Paul also instructs us to be truthful (Ephesians 4:25): "*Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbour, for we are all members of one body.*" But Joseph's brothers lied again and again. Jacob was so distraught that he refused to be comforted and, filled with self-pity, declared he would be sorrowful until the day he died!

As this sad chapter ends we might easily conclude that the dreams Joseph received were in fact being broken because it all looked so disastrous, but that would be to make a grave mistake. We must not forget that God had sent those dreams to Joseph, and therefore we must not leave him out

of the picture. Although they did not realise it, by their very sinful actions Joseph's brothers were in fact fulfilling God's plan for Joseph and not bringing it to nothing, and we shall see that unfolding in coming chapters. Joseph was taken to Egypt and sold as a slave to a man named Potiphar (v36). We know he was an important man because he was described as one of Pharaoh's officials and the captain of the guard. The 'guard' literally means 'slaughterers', being Pharaoh's bodyguard of top soldiers who were responsible for the execution of those who had committed capital offences.

Chapter 2 Genesis 39 Joseph in Potiphar's house

Before going into the details of the next stage in Joseph's life, it is worth pointing out two things.

- Firstly, there was absolutely no complaint by Joseph against God for the events that had befallen him. His experiences had been traumatic, to say the least. He had been hated by his brothers, sold as a piece of merchandise, and now had become a slave in Egypt – a change for the worse that was as dramatic as it was sudden and unexpected. Yet Joseph did not grumble against God, nor did he turn his back and forsake God. And that is the mark of one who knew his life was in the Lord's hands, even if he did not fully understand why such adversity should come upon him.
- Secondly, there is the question as to why Joseph was suffering in this way? And indeed that has puzzled and troubled the Lord's people down the centuries. Why do the righteous suffer? (See Psalm 73 and Asaph's

struggle with this issue and the solution he arrived at.) This is an issue which we will come face to face with on more than one occasion as we go through Joseph's life, and we must say that it was God's refining and proving ground. Through his trials the Lord was building Joseph's character, and he was not brought out of them until the Lord had finished that process. The Lord had a plan to exalt Joseph to a very high position, but many men and women who have been elevated before they were ready have become proud and arrogant. This is a danger for all of us, and so the Lord was preparing Joseph through his trials so that he would be a better servant of God in future days, and that is a comfort for us with our trials today.

Some years ago I heard a Pastor named Joseph Ton speak about his own experiences. Several times he had been arrested and imprisoned for preaching the gospel of Christ. And on one occasion while he was being interrogated and threatened his captors were increasingly frustrated by his calm and serene attitude. When asked 'Why?', he simply replied, 'You cannot do anything to me except what God wants you to do, and whatever you do God will use it for my good and his glory.' Here, as a slave in Egypt, Joseph was entering into that process by which the Lord was shaping him into the kind of man he wanted Joseph to be, and God has done this many times since with his children. Another Biblical example of this is the Psalmist David. He too was unjustly treated by others, oppressed and persecuted. (e.g. By king Saul, by his son Absalom.) This finds its expression a number of times in the longest Psalm

he wrote, where he speaks of the benefit of his trials (Psalm 119:67): *“Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word.”* (Psalm 119:71): *“It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.”* (Psalm 119:75): *“I know, O Lord, that your laws are righteous, and in faithfulness you have afflicted me.”* (Psalm 119:92): *“If your law had not been my delight, I would have perished in my affliction.”* David was able to look at his trials, and some of them were tremendous, and see the loving hand of God at work in them all to instruct him, and sanctify him, and make him more holy. And while he was hunted by his enemies he was able to write in Psalm 119:110, *“The wicked have set a snare for me, but I have not strayed from your precepts.”* David remained faithful to the Lord throughout his difficulties and those very trials proved his dependability (Psalm 119:141): *“Though I am lowly and despised, I do not forget your precepts.”* (Psalm 119:143): *“Trouble and distress have come upon me, but your commands are my delight.”* (Psalm 119:157): *“Many are the foes who persecute me, but I have not turned from your statutes.”* His trials built and proved his character, and this is what was happening to Joseph, and this is what still happens to believers in the Lord Jesus Christ today. God uses trials and difficulties to make us more like the Lord Jesus Christ, and these things are recorded in the Bible for our instruction and our encouragement (Romans 15:4): *“For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”* And what is perhaps the most amazing thing of all, we are

told that the Lord Jesus Christ himself learned obedience through suffering (Hebrews 5:7-8): *“During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered...”* if he who was perfect had to endure, how much more so is it necessary for us to learn obedience to God through our sufferings!

We must now consider the next stage in Joseph’s life when he arrived in Egypt.

1) Joseph as a slave (v1-6a).

As mentioned at the end of the previous chapter, Joseph was purchased by a man named Potiphar (see Genesis 37:36 & 39:1). Potiphar was a very important man in Egypt, at the very centre of government because he was in charge of Pharaoh’s bodyguards, and therefore in the high echelons of civil life. Just consider for a moment the effect these drastic changes for Joseph would have had on him. The shock would have been enormous. There was a new language to learn and new customs to observe. A different religion to confront and resist in his own soul, because it was idolatrous and included emperor worship. But we must say in spite of all this, it was no accident that Potiphar purchased Joseph, because God was working out his sovereign plan for him, but Potiphar himself was unaware of any of this because he was a pagan. Yet does that not help us to marvel at God’s providence, because his unseen hand is able to use even the wicked to fulfil his purposes of blessing for his people.

It can be safely assumed that Potiphar's home would have been a fairly well equipped and furnished house as fitting for such a guard. Potiphar would also have been quite wealthy as we are told he had household servants (v4 & v11), and he could afford to purchase Joseph as another slave in his household. Potiphar had a property, money, and fields (v4f), and Joseph lived 'in' the house (v2). But the key phrase is in verse 2, "*The Lord was with Joseph...*" Neither the hatred of his brothers, nor being sold as a slave, nor being taken to a foreign land, nor being surrounded by the religion of Egypt, had separated Joseph from the Lord. How reassuring to us! His outward circumstances had changed but his relationship to God had not altered at all. This is exactly what Paul tells us about the privilege of every Christian believer. Nothing can separate us from the Lord our God or his loving care, however contrary it might appear at times. Paul asks these questions in Romans 8:35-36: "*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: 'For your sake we face death all day long; we are counted as sheep to be slaughtered.'*" This list is very comprehensive and contains a good summary of the things we are most likely to fear and consider a great danger to us. They are things we would rather not have to face. But Paul goes on to say that even if we are called to face such things, none of them will be able to cut us off from God (Romans 8:37-39): "*No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the*

present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." How all-inclusive and absolute that grand statement is. The Christian believer can never be separated from the love of God in Christ, and this is what Joseph was now experiencing. The Lord was with him.

We must also say that this was an indication of Joseph's own faithfulness to God throughout this period. As we have already mentioned, there is no record at all that Joseph complained to God, or grew bitter towards him, or wanted to forsake God. Many have forsaken him for much less, but not Joseph. This is a trait we shall see consistently throughout his life, even when he had to face further hardships.

The result of the Lord's presence was that the Lord prospered Joseph (v2). And it is significant that Potiphar saw that the Lord was with him and was blessing everything Joseph did (v3). How did Potiphar know it was the Lord who was with Joseph? Joseph must have told him about the Lord, and that itself is a challenge to us not to be ashamed of our Lord, whether we are with people of high or low estate. But this did not mean that Potiphar began to seek after the Lord for himself. Sadly there is no evidence of that taking place at all. And that is a tragedy because Potiphar profited himself from the Lord's goodness to Joseph, but he is never once seen to give thanks to God for his goodness. This is a danger even believers can fall into, and is one of the reasons why David wrote in Psalm 103:2, "*Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his*

benefits...” Sadly there are those today who will listen to a Christian’s testimony about the love of Christ, and even acknowledge the good it has brought to the believer, but who say, “Well, that’s fine for you and I am glad it works in your life, but it’s not for me.”

Clearly Joseph was a man of enormous integrity because his master entrusted him with everything he owned and he became his personal attendant (v4-6). He was not corrupt, and did not steal from his master, but worked well and was thoroughly reliable, because if he had been otherwise his master would certainly not have entrusted him with so much. Potiphar only concerned himself with the food he ate (v6). All he possessed, including his money, that great source of temptation, was entrusted to Joseph. In the New Testament Christian believers are instructed to be faithful to their masters just as Joseph was. (See Ephesians 6:5-8, Colossians 3:22-25.) Jesus gave this instruction to his disciples in Matthew 5:13-16, *“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men. You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”*

It is probably right to say that several years must have passed since the time Joseph’s brothers sold him until the promotion he now enjoyed in Potiphar’s house. The Bible

does not give us precise details, but it would have taken a reasonable time for him to learn a new language, also time would have been needed before he had been proved as one who was trustworthy. So he would be well into his twenties.

2) Joseph facing temptation (v6bff)

a. The powerful temptation.

We are told that Joseph was very attractive to look at (v6b), *‘...well-built and handsome...’* A period of time went by and then Potiphar’s wife took notice of him (v6b-7). The words *“took notice of him”* mean to look at something or someone with desire, to really want something. And before long she expressed this verbally, *“Come to bed with me!”* She was a thoroughly immoral woman, an unfaithful wife, and a self-centred individual. She let her desires gain the better of her and wanted Joseph to join her in committing adultery. Sinful desires, if not put down immediately will result in serious sin. We saw this earlier in the land of Canaan with Joseph’s brothers and their continued hatred of him, and now we see it again in Egypt. (See James 1:13-15.) This is a solemn reminder that sinfulness is found in the hearts of men and women in every nation. It is found in high places amongst leaders of nations, and it is found in ordinary people. It is the one thing that we have in common with all other people on the earth, our hearts have a bias towards wrongdoing which is sin. What we see in Potiphar’s wife should stand as a solemn warning to us. Sexual activity outside of God’s purpose in marriage is like an unleashed hungry tiger. It is fierce and will wreak havoc when not resisted. If you are

ever tempted to sin in this way remind your heart immediately of God's very clear command in Exodus 20:14, "*You shall not commit adultery.*" And we must add that the Lord Jesus Christ expanded the teaching of this command in his sermon on the mount in Matthew 5:27-28, "*You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*" Jesus then went on to describe radical action that is necessary with sins of this nature (Matthew 5:29-30): "*If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.*" Jesus was using what is known as hyperbole, an exaggeration to drive his point home. It is not that he wants us literally to gouge our right eye out, because the left eye could be guilty of the same sin as the right eye. Instead, he is telling us that radical action is necessary if we are going to avoid total disaster in this area. Sinful desires must be resisted vigorously. Tragically Potiphar's wife did not do this, and she allowed what she saw and touched to lead her into iniquity. She fits perfectly those described by the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 59:4, "*...they conceive trouble and give birth to evil.*" (See also Job 15:35; Psalm 7:14.) Tragically we must add that this sordid episode is so much like the prevailing immoral views in the world today where sex is cheapened, and immorality is applauded and glamorised. It

is seen in the reporting of the lurid details of people's affairs. It is seen on the screen in cinemas and on television. It is the common theme of many novels, and there is widespread pornography. The world we live in is no different from that of Joseph's time, but it is fair to say it has certainly become more blatant in its exploitation and display of sinful attitudes and behaviour.

b. Joseph's firm resistance.

Joseph remained resolutely faithful to both the Lord and his master and refused this woman when it would have been so easy for him to give in to her. And what a marvellous example Joseph sets before us. It is put simply but powerfully in Genesis 39:8, "*But he refused.*" In those three words is found the answer to every temptation to do wrong we may ever meet. In those three words is the description of a man who knew and loved and obeyed God, whatever it may cost him.

Joseph also reasoned with this woman to show her how wrong it would be to commit such a sinful act (Genesis 39:8-9): "*'With me in charge,' he told her, 'my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care. No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?'*" What a remarkable strength of character Joseph was developing, and how he must have gladdened the heart of God by his firm stand against this woman. But the woman and her demands did not go away, repeatedly she tried to seduce him. She tried to entice him, and day after

day Joseph refused. And we are reminded through this that temptation does not always go away from us. Remember, the devil did not leave Jesus alone after his wilderness experience (Luke 4:13). The devil will also try to wear us down if he cannot get us any easier way. He is relentless, and therefore we must remain alert and resolute in our stand against temptation (James 4:7). Joseph was not at all deterred at this onslaught by this woman, but remained absolutely faithful to the Lord and to his master.

An important lesson to note.

If you are married, remember in this world of temptation the best thing you can give your husband or wife is your faithful purity. If you are single, the principle is the same. The best thing you can give to someone else with whom you may be tempted to sin is your faithful purity. And whether you are married or single, over and above everyone else, the best thing we can render to the Lord is our faithful purity. This is what Joseph did. Do not be deceived by what anyone may say or do to suggest otherwise, it is God's will for us that we be holy (1 Thessalonians 4:3-8): *"It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honourable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God; and that in this matter no-one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him. The Lord will punish men for all such sins, as we have already warned you. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. Therefore he who rejects this instruction does not reject man but God, who gives you his*

Holy Spirit." And if you have failed at this point and fallen into sin, then repent of it immediately, confessing your guilt to the Lord, and seeking his mercy. The Lord is gracious and compassionate, and will not turn away those who are really repentant.

One can only imagine how enraged Joseph's purity must have made this woman. It certainly did not shame her because she persisted, and we see here how polluted she was. Throughout this difficult period Joseph was not deterred from fulfilling his duties, but loyally served his master in every way. But Joseph's faithfulness brought him into a very risky position, for one day as faithfully he went about his duties, the house was empty and no other servants were around (v11). Potiphar's wife took her opportunity and pursued Joseph again, this time catching him by his cloak and holding on in her vain attempt to satisfy her lust. Joseph did the best and wisest thing in such circumstances and fled. This was something Paul instructed Timothy to do in 2 Timothy 2:22, *"Flee the evil desires of youth, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart."* However, Potiphar's wife held on to Joseph's cloak, which he left behind as he fled. We must stress at this point that Joseph had acted with complete integrity and purity and faithfulness, and if ever there was someone whose behaviour was pleasing to the Lord, it was Joseph's at this point. And here we are taught another very important lesson. Our obedience to God does not mean we will not face temptations, and sometimes difficulties of the very worst kind can come upon us totally unexpectedly and

unsought. Therefore we need to watch and pray constantly so that we do not fall into the temptations we will meet in this world (see Mark 14:38 and Matt 6:13). Remember, it is not being tempted that is sinful because Jesus was tempted himself, it is giving in to the temptation that is wrong.

c. The woman's lie (v13-18).

Because Potiphar's wife was so angry with Joseph for refusing her enticements she lied about him. She would have had to explain why she had Joseph's cloak in her possession, and so she schemed a complete fabrication and placed all the blame on Joseph. She called her household servants and claimed Joseph had made the advances to her and that she had screamed for help! Of course the household servants were out of the house while Joseph was there so they had no idea what had actually gone on, but Potiphar's wife was artfully using this to her own advantage. She was filled with anger against Joseph and was going to get her revenge on him for not gratifying her sinful desires. She claimed he fled when she screamed and had left his cloak behind. She waited until Potiphar came in and repeated the same pack of lies to him. In an indirect way she tried to blame Potiphar in part because she said this was the Hebrew slave he had brought to them. This was very similar to the response of Adam when God questioned him about his sin in Genesis 3:12 because he tried to put the blame on God himself! Replying to God we read, "*The man said, 'The woman you put here with me – she gave me some fruit from the tree and I ate it.'*" One sin begets another, and there is a blatant attempt to

shift the blame onto someone else instead of honestly owning up and repenting of it.

Before we say much more about Potiphar's wife, we must examine our own hearts. Human pride is such a strong and pervasive thing, that it can cause us to be dishonest about our own sin, instead of confessing it to the Lord and seeking his forgiveness. This is one of the hardest things for the human heart to do, but it is absolutely essential if we are to enjoy his forgiveness.

Potiphar's response was immediate (v19), "*...he burned with anger.*" Poor Joseph was again unfairly treated and thrown into prison. Death was the prescribed punishment for crimes of this nature, and 1000 blows was the Egyptian penalty for attempted adultery and this usually resulted in the death of the victim. So although Joseph was entirely innocent, this was really all he could have expected. However, that did not happen, and his life was spared. The Bible is silent as to the reasons. It might have been that his previous integrity and faithfulness made his master relent. It might be that Potiphar suspected all his wife had said was not entirely true. But we are simply not told. One thing that is evident is that the hand of the Lord was at work behind the scenes to spare Joseph's life and for a particular purpose that was still going to take some years to unfold. Little did Potiphar's wife realise that her designs for Joseph were going to be utterly frustrated, and that her unleashed hatred and lying was actually going to help instead of hinder the purposes of God for him!

At this stage in the story we learn another lesson and it is this: sometimes it can cost us dearly to be faithful to God.

We might be despised, ridiculed, mocked, even imprisoned. But Jesus told us that unless we are prepared to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow him, then we cannot be his disciples (Matthew 16:24-27)! Costly it will be at times, but in the end the Lord will overrule for our good.

3) Joseph as a prisoner (v19b-23).

Joseph was placed in the prison reserved for the king's prisoners. That it should be in this prison and not one reserved for other prisoners is going to be of great significance, but none of that was obvious to Joseph or anyone else at the time, but God was working his purposes out for Joseph and his purposes cannot fail. The word used for prison indicates it was probably a round construction with a wall surrounding it, such as a fortress-like building. As we think of what has happened to Joseph so far, it is not difficult to conclude that he was having a rather large dose of misery and trial. At that point in time life did not look at all bright for him and his prospects, humanly speaking, were virtually zero. But, even with all this unjust treatment, the Lord had not deserted him.

Lesson i.

We do not always get into trouble because the Lord is displeased with us. There are times when that is true and the Lord has to chasten us (Hebrews 12:1-13), but that is not always the case, and many times God's people find themselves facing terrible situations which are completely out of their control and which, to human eyes, are unfair, but these are not because the Lord is angry with us. Joseph was suffering for righteousness' sake, not because he had

committed some dreadful sin. Therefore we need to be very careful in both what we think about people in difficulties and what we say to them. We must not rush into assuming they are guilty of some great sin. Remember Job's example. A few rash and unkind words can cause others to suffer even more.

Lesson ii.

(Genesis 39:20b-21a) "*But while Joseph was there in the prison, **the Lord was with him...***" The words used here imply that Joseph was in this prison for quite some time, but that was not an obstacle to the Lord being with him. The Lord does not desert his children when we are in such difficulties, and Joseph felt God's presence with him. Indeed, in a remarkably similar way, the Lord prospered Joseph in prison as he had done in Potiphar's house. Not only was the Lord with him, but the Lord showed him kindness and the prison warder was favourably disposed to Joseph as a result. The warder was the man in charge of the running of the prison. Today he might be known by the title administrator or governor or warden or commandant or other title. (Different countries use different descriptions.) He was responsible for the smooth running of the prison, and especially its security. He would have viewed prisoners with great suspicion, as many of them would have been guilty of very serious crimes. But such was the Lord's blessing and enabling that Joseph bore a good testimony and a consistently holy life with the result the warder knew he could trust him with all those in the prison (v22.). Such was the trust placed in Joseph and the faithfulness with which he handled that trust that he was

left in charge of everything that was done, and it was all crowned with success. This is quite remarkable, and it was all because the Lord was with him, as is stressed a second time in verse 23, and not just that Joseph had good skills, which indeed he did have. Instead it is God's actions that are stressed, the covenant keeping Lord who gave him this success.

Again note the deafening silence. There is not a single reference to Joseph grumbling or accusing God of being unjust! He had done what was right and was now suffering what was wrong. He had been unfairly rejected, and now lay forgotten and humanly helpless in a prison where he could expect to be for the rest of his days. But he did not wallow in despair nor did he surrender to self-pity. Even in the prison he simply trusted in the Lord, and the Lord blessed him. Although Joseph's outward conditions changed he did not. His heart was steadfast and loyal to the Lord wherever the Lord in his providence placed him. And God had not rejected him, nor was he ignoring him, instead he was preparing Joseph for future service, and in the meantime Joseph served God where he was, in the king's prison. And there is for us a simple but lovely lesson to learn from this, namely, that there is no situation where we cannot serve the Lord. Even if we were completely paralysed, or unable to move around because of old age, we can still pray, and there is no greater service than that.

Chapter 3 Genesis 40 Joseph In Prison

At the end of chapter 2 we left Joseph in prison through absolutely no fault of his own, yet with the wonderfully comforting fact that the Lord was with him (Genesis 39:21f). We reminded ourselves that there is absolutely nothing that can separate the believer from the Lord our God, and prison bars and doors most certainly cannot lock him out. The Lord graciously prospered Joseph in this situation, with the result that the man in charge of the prison left the running of things entirely in Joseph's hands. Even in the prison he was a man of integrity, and sought to serve the Lord in a trustworthy manner. Because of the grace of God Joseph did not give in to despair, but saw there was work to be done and he sought to glorify God by doing it. It was very much the same with the apostle Paul in the New Testament, because he served God in writing a number of his letters from his prison cell, and on one occasion asked the Colossian believers to pray that God would give him the opportunity to share the gospel even while he was locked away, as we see in Colossians 4:2-4. As Joseph honoured the Lord, so the Lord honoured Joseph.

1) Joseph's prison companions (v1-4).

Genesis 40 begins with the words, "*Some time later...*", reminding us that Joseph's predicament was a prolonged matter, and probably months, if not years, are meant by this expression. The same words are used in Genesis 4:3 to describe the period taken for crops to grow, so this was a considerable length of time. Things were not working out very quickly, and this must have weighed heavily on his heart. Yet again there is no reference to Joseph rebelling

against the Lord and the situation he was allowed to be in by the providence of God. He just got on with fulfilling the trust placed in him by the prison warder. There was a remarkable consistency in Joseph's life regardless of the changing and adverse circumstances he had to endure. Wherever he was he sought to live his life in a God honouring way. Consider Paul's words to the Corinthian believers (1 Corinthians 10:31): "*So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.*" Whatever position we are in today, whether it is easy or difficult, whether it has come as a just reward or, as with Joseph, as a result of injustice, the Lord wants every Christian believer to live for him.

It is after this period in prison that our attention is directed to two new prisoners (Genesis 40:1): Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker. These two men had very high positions of trust in Egypt. The baker had to be a man who would produce food fit for a king, ensuring that there was nothing in it that might do the king harm. The cupbearer tasted the king's wine to ensure it was not poisoned (cf. Nehemiah did this for the king in Babylon – Nehemiah 1:11). Such men had to be above reproach, loyal, trustworthy and faithful defenders of their master. And very often these men became the king's confidants and advisors. But for a reason we are not told, they had offended Pharaoh in some way, with the result that he was angry with them and threw them into the very prison where Joseph was kept (v3). The prison adjoined the house of Potiphar, the captain of the guard. We can see in this an example of the absolute power by which the ancient Pharaohs ruled. The term

'Pharaoh' was really a general title for the Egyptian kings. Their word was law, and had to be obeyed without question or hesitation. And if Pharaoh gave the word for you to be executed, then you would be executed. And so these men are in the prison that was kept by the king's executioners, and Joseph was with them. We are told interestingly that it was (v4) '*the captain of the guard*', that is Potiphar himself, who entrusted them into Joseph's care - a further indication that he did not believe Joseph had been as corrupt as his wife had claimed, otherwise he would have been killed already! But Joseph was ordered to be their servant, and thus we are told '*he attended them*' (v4b). So Joseph, even though there was no prospect of release, continued to work well, and to care for these two important prisoners. And again we are told this went on '*for some time*' (v4c), many days passed.

2) The baker's and cupbearer's dreams (v5-22).

a. Their distress from their sleep.

On the very same night both of these special prisoners had important dreams. They powerfully affected each man because when Joseph came to them the very next day, he could see that they were both disturbed – "*they were dejected*" (v6). We need to remember that in the ancient Near East it was the commonly held belief that all dreams had special meaning and that through them the dreamer could predict his future. Now we have already seen when we looked at Joseph's dreams that the Bible tells us not all dreams are of that nature (Ecclesiastes 5:3), but this was the superstitious belief that prevailed at the time. It is important to mention this so as to avoid falling into that

mistake about our dreams. But having said that, these two dreams were about the futures of these two men, and they were evidently from the Lord himself. And so Joseph asked why they were so sad, and we see in this another aspect of Joseph's character, for he was not only efficient and a man of integrity, but also a man who cared for others. The two men tell him they had both had dreams, but were at a loss because there was no one to interpret them. Normally they would have gone to the wise men and magicians of the day (see 41:8). Joseph had not been caught up by such superstitious practices, even though he had been in Egypt for several years by now. He knew that the only one who knows the future is the Lord God, and not men. Therefore, without hesitation he spoke up immediately about God to these two men (v8): *"Do not interpretations belong to God?"* His quick response here is very instructive as well as challenging. He was ready to direct people to the Lord whenever the opportunity arose, and when it did, he took it. Peter tells us that Christian believers are to be ready to speak about the Lord to others, just as Joseph was (1 Peter 3:15): *"Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have."* By this statement, Joseph was directing the attention of these two men away from their superstition and false religion to the only true and living God. We also see that his own trust in and walk with God was very real, and strong and close, for he knew God could tell him what the dreams meant (v8).

b. The cupbearer's dream (v9-15).

It is at this point that we are told one of the men was in fact the chief cupbearer, so a man of considerable importance and influence. He had dreamt about a vine which had produced three branches, flowers and then grapes, which he took and squeezed so the juice ran into Pharaoh's cup which he was holding. So Joseph explained the meaning God had shown him. The three branches represented three days, after which time he was assured that Pharaoh would raise up his head and restore him to his former position of trust and responsibility.

Joseph did not doubt that what God had revealed regarding the dream would come to pass so he sought the cupbearer's help regarding his own situation. He asked him to show kindness by remembering him when he was released from prison and restored to his former position. Because the cupbearer would regularly be in Pharaoh's presence, he would be ideally situated to plead Joseph's case. Joseph then explained how he had been forcibly taken from the land of the Hebrews, and was in prison in Egypt not because he had done wrong but because wrong had been done to him. Anyone with a sense of justice could see the rightness of Joseph's case and the cupbearer would be able to show gratitude for what Joseph had done for him.

c. The baker's dream (v16-19).

Encouraged by what he had heard about his fellow prisoner, the baker, who is also described as the chief baker, related his own dream. He had three baskets of bread on his head; the top one being full with all kinds of baked goods, and the birds of the air flew down and devoured them. Joseph again faithfully declared the Lord's

interpretation, even though it was of an entirely different nature from the first and exceedingly difficult information to have to share. The three baskets also referred to three days, but on that third day Pharaoh, instead of lifting up his head, as with the cupbearer, would lift off his head and hang him on a tree. What a solemn message to have to relate and what a solemn message to have to receive. We are reminded here that sometimes God's servants are called on today to do that difficult task. They not only have to tell about heaven, but also about hell. They not only have to tell about forgiveness, but also about condemnation. They not only have to tell about salvation, but also about judgment. And these are not easy tasks, but the faithful servant of the Lord will declare the whole counsel of God, even those truths in the Bible which are hard and difficult to speak about. Joseph was a faithful servant of God, and declared the sombre news to the chief baker. One of the sad things about the baker was that there is no record of him having sought the Lord for mercy after having received such solemn news. Joseph had told him about God and the interpretation was from God, but there is nothing said about the man preparing to meet God. Tragically there are many today just like that. They hear of God's grace and God's judgment, but never humble themselves before the Lord for his mercy, and die without hope. We need to learn from this and ensure we are ready to die, for none of us knows the day or hour when our lives will come to an end. Therefore we must be ready to meet God now, by repenting of our sin and placing our faith, our

trust in the Lord Jesus Christ to forgive our sins and to equip us for heaven.

d. The fulfilment of these dreams (v20-22).

The third day was Pharaoh's birthday, and so he gave a feast for those officials in his service. Both the baker and cupbearer were paraded before the gathering, and in what appears to have been the mere whim of Pharaoh, the cupbearer was restored and the baker hanged, exactly as Joseph had interpreted. We learn a vital lesson here. The Word of God cannot be broken. It will always be fulfilled and never fail. And both aspects of God's Word will be fulfilled, namely, those passages assuring us of his mercy, grace and salvation, as well as those that warn of his wrath, condemnation and judgment. Just because some of God's Word is unpleasant news to hear does not mean it will not happen, and most certainly gives no one the right to claim that it will not. This is very important these days with respect to the Biblical doctrine about hell. The Bible, the Word of God, declares that unbelievers will suffer in hell for eternity, but sadly there are some who are declaring that is not true. This is a gross act of the worst unkindness and lack of loving concern for our world. These false views will not prevent God doing what he has said he will do! It is a great sin to fail to give a warning to sinners that they will go to hell forever if they refuse to repent of their sins and place their trust in Christ. It is also to undermine the sufferings of Christ on the cross, who died in such agony, having been forsaken by his Father. He suffered hell in the place of his people, and to diminish the Bible's teaching about hell is wrong. Therefore, how we have cause to

thank God for men like Joseph who faithfully declare to us the whole of God's Word, and how we should heed all God's warnings and flee from the wrath to come by fleeing to Christ! It is worth noting at this point that Joseph was aged 28 when all this took place, by comparing Genesis 41:1 with 41:46 when, two years later, he was aged thirty.

3) An enormous disappointment (v23).

a. Joseph was forgotten.

Upon his release and reinstatement, the chief cupbearer completely forgot about Joseph! He was guilty of the grossest ingratitude, and utter self-centredness because he did not remember Joseph at all! It really is quite staggering to read about. How could he act in such a careless way after Joseph, who'd been so helpful to him, had asked for his help? How could he be so ungrateful to God who'd accomplished his release and told him about it before it happened through his servant Joseph? But poor Joseph was out of sight and out of mind. The disappointment must have been crushing after all that Joseph had endured. He had been ill-treated by his brothers, sold to travellers, enslaved by Potiphar, imprisoned unjustly, and now, when there seemed at least some opportunity for his case to be heard and corrected, Joseph was forgotten!

As we enter the next chapter, Genesis 41:1, we are told he was left in that prison for a further two full long monotonous years! So for the past thirteen years, from aged seventeen to 30, Joseph had suffered one disaster after another. And we may well ask the question 'Why?' Why did this man have to endure so much that was unfair? Why did this man have to experience such harsh treatment?

Why did this man have to go through such prolonged suffering? And we come back to what we said earlier in this book, God had not finished preparing him for future service. Throughout all this time Joseph was proving himself to be one who was faithful in that which was least (see Matthew 25:21; Luke 16:10). And all of this was vital and necessary preparation for a marvellous future, although as yet all of that was completely unknown to Joseph and any human being on earth. Joseph had learned and was practising the principle that it is important to serve the Lord faithfully and diligently in whatever way possible. We too must be faithful to God wherever we may be and whatever may be our circumstances. Joseph was not yet, in the purposes of God, ready to be brought out of prison, but although he had been forgotten by the chief cupbearer, he had not been forgotten by God.

b. The absence of complaint.

We are not told how Joseph felt through this extra long ordeal, but there is again the complete absence of any bitterness or objection or protest or murmuring against God. Though he had been victimised again and again, he continued to wait and trust and lean on the Lord. He patiently endured it all. What a man of spiritual stature he had become! What an example he sets for us to follow. Indeed, what we see Joseph doing in Egypt is required of every Christian believer today, because it was the way the Lord Jesus himself responded as Peter reminds us (1 Peter 2:20-23): "*...how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and endure it, this is commendable before*

God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. When they hurled insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.” And in the next chapter (1 Peter 3:17-18) he writes, “...It is better, if it is God’s will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.”

4) Some lessons for us to apply.

We live in a world where many, many people have suffered in similar ways to Joseph. Perhaps like Joseph you have suffered unfair treatment from your family. For example, you may be someone whose parents have ill-treated and abused you, or whose children have caused you heartache and despised all the loving care you lavished upon them while they grew up. Perhaps like Joseph untrue accusations have been made against you by someone. I know a man who was falsely accused of child abuse, and although he was completely cleared as the child’s grandfather was the guilty one, he was told his name would still be on police records for ten years! Sadly some people are more ready to believe falsehoods than the truth and you can find your character stained by them and with no opportunity to clear your name. Perhaps like Joseph you have found your freedom has been unexpectedly curtailed and perhaps for a long period. You might actually have been imprisoned unjustly, or been struck down by some illness or accident, and you find yourself unable to live as

freely as you once did. I well remember a very active friend who was struck down by a paralysing stroke that confined her to a wheel chair for the rest of her life. Perhaps as Joseph was forgotten by Pharaoh’s cupbearer, you have been unfairly abandoned by those you have trusted. Around the world today there are many families where this has happened. There are loyal, hardworking and loving wives whose husbands have left them, and faithful, diligent and caring husbands who have been forsaken by their wives. Such a devastating experience has left many deeply hurt and feeling as if they have been forgotten. All such experiences, and a host of others we might like to think about, are traumatic. They hurt deeply, and can leave us dazed, wondering what is happening to us. Well, Joseph was a man who knew all about those things in his own life, yet we find no record of him being overwhelmed with despair. That is not to suggest Joseph found his experiences enjoyable, because we are told, for example, in Genesis 42:21 that when his brothers had attacked him he was deeply distressed and pleaded for his life. He felt pain and disappointment, just as we do. But none-the-less he was wonderfully sustained by God through all his trials and adversities. There are four lessons Joseph’s experience teaches us, and which we need to cultivate. And I use that term ‘cultivate’ quite deliberately, because these are qualities that do not come to us naturally and which take time and hard effort to nurture. The four are as follows:

- Do not be bitter against the Lord, for that will turn you away from him and deprive you of the resources of his help and grace and mercy.

- Do pray to God to help you and reveal himself to you and to refine you through your present sufferings and make you more like Christ, asking him to use these dark days to teach you more about himself.
- Do seek to serve the Lord with gladness in your present difficulties, and do not use them as an excuse for being unfaithful to God. Remember the words of Jesus in Luke 16:10, *“Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will be dishonest with much.”*
- Do rest in God in humble and wholehearted faith, trusting him to bless you through your adversities, and to teach you his will and way. Every Christian believer needs to remember the Lord is with us and using our present difficulties to mould our lives.

The Lord never once abandoned Joseph, and he will never abandon us, or forget us, but in his sovereign goodness draw us closer to himself (Hebrews 13:5). Remember the Lord Jesus Christ suffered in all these ways:

- He was treated unfairly and cruelly
- He was lied about by false witnesses
- He was arrested and bound
- He was even abandoned by all his disciples who ran away when he was arrested

In the end he was put to death by wicked men and was crucified. Therefore, he knows the pains and hurts we experience in life, and that’s what makes him such a precious and relevant Saviour. This is so helpfully expressed in Hebrews 4:14-16, *“Therefore, since we have*

a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”

Chapter 4 Genesis 41:1-46 Pharaoh’s dreams

Genesis 41 begins with these words, *“When two full years had passed, Pharaoh had a dream...”* It is emphasised that the disappointment Joseph experienced when the chief cupbearer forgot him and did not speak to Pharaoh on his behalf went on day after day for 730 days! That it was unjust for Joseph to be in prison and that it was unkind of the cupbearer to neglect him did not shorten the time he had to spend in that prison in Potiphar’s house. What a lengthy ordeal Joseph had to endure. How discouraged he must have felt. But again we are confronted with the fact that God’s timing is so different from ours and is never in a rush. Peter helpfully instructs us about this when he was dealing with God’s promise to end the world and to bring about the destruction of ungodly men. Some were questioning why they had to wait so long for this to happen, and wondered why God had not already acted to bring this about. Peter’s answer is very instructive (2 Peter 3:8-9): *“But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his*

promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” The Lord is never too early nor too late. We are often so very impatient and want to rush things along. The Lord had a plan and purpose for Joseph, as he does for each of his children, and throughout this period Joseph was learning the valuable lesson of being patient. This is something that James writes about in such a practical way (James 1:2-5): *“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.”* And so the Lord was preparing and shaping Joseph’s character through this long process, and we need to remember that this went on, not only for the two years while he was forgotten in the prison, but in all for thirteen years. The Lord is never in a hurry in his dealings with us, but he is thorough. Therefore we must be patient, and patience can only be exercised and developed when we go through trials and are put under test. When things are going well, and life is easy then we do not need patience, but when life is going against us, and the way is hard, then patience is indispensable. However, God’s preparation time was now reaching its maturity, and Joseph was on the verge of a transformation in his circumstances that was meteoric and remarkable and life-long.

1) Pharaoh dreams (v1-8).

The goodness of God is something that is very remarkable and far reaching in its application (Psalm 145:9): *“The Lord is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made.”* Indeed God is even good to his enemies, and Christian believers are encouraged to be the same (Matthew 5:43-45): *“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. **He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.**”* And we see this unfolding in the life of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, even though he was an idolatrous man. And through this God was going to bring great blessing to Joseph and preserve his father Jacob and brothers, as well as many others.

It came about by Pharaoh having a very restless night. He had two dreams that really disturbed him. In the first Pharaoh found himself standing on the banks of the great river Nile (Genesis 41:1-4). As his dream developed he saw seven healthy cows come up out of the river to graze, and they are described as *‘sleek and fat’*. These were followed by seven more cows who were in a dreadful condition, for they were thin and undernourished and are described as being *‘gaunt’*. Then these thin animals proceeded to do something very unusual – they ate the seven fat cows. At this Pharaoh woke up, as undoubtedly this unusual dream had disturbed him. He eventually went back to sleep again, but only to have a second alarming dream (Genesis 41:5-7). This time he saw seven ears of corn growing on a single stalk, and they are described as

being *'healthy and good'*. Then seven other ears of corn sprouted, but these were of very poor quality and are described as *'thin and scorched by the east wind'*. The east wind was known as the 'khamsin' in Egypt and was very hot coming from the desert and could be devastating to crops. Then these substandard ears of corn devoured the seven fat healthy ears and swallowed them. And again Pharaoh woke up as this was a most unusual thing to dream. Finally, when morning came, Pharaoh was very troubled by what he had dreamt and was in some distress, and so he called for his magicians and wise men to tell him what these dreams meant, but they were powerless to do so. We see here a glimpse of Pharaoh's spiritual condition because he did not seek the Lord God to help him. He turned to men, who were considered able to reveal the meaning of his dreams, but they were useless and powerless to help their king, even though he had told them exactly what he had dreamt. There are many today who are held in fear and dread by those who get involved in magic and the occult, and think that these men and women have the answers to all our questions. The large number of horoscopes and similar things that are on sale around the world is enormous, and millions are held under the power of these empty superstitions. All of this is a lie that Satan is behind in order to blind the minds of unbelievers to keep them from seeking Christ (see 2 Corinthians 4:4). Indeed, God has forbidden us to be involved in any such things at all (Deuteronomy 18:10): *"Let no-one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practises divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages*

in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord..." (See also Leviticus 19:31; Revelation 21:8.) Pharaoh learned that when it came to things that really mattered his magicians were powerless to help him, and that was a very valuable lesson for anyone to receive.

2) The Cupbearer's intervention (v9-13).

The chief cupbearer, being one of Pharaoh's important officials, would have been present to witness the king's distress and the failure of the magicians. And all of this jogged his memory, and seems to have convicted him over his own failure and neglect regarding Joseph (Genesis 41:9): *"Then the chief cupbearer said to Pharaoh, 'Today I am reminded of my shortcomings.'*" Some have suggested that the cupbearer deliberately forgot about Joseph until it was to his own advantage to remember him. That may well be the case, although the Bible gives no such details. But what is certain is that he did remember Joseph and he did acknowledge he had been at fault for forgetting him. Then he proceeded to inform Pharaoh about his own experience when he met Joseph in prison (v10-13). He related how Pharaoh had been angry with the baker and himself and had thrown them into the very prison over which the captain of the guard, Potiphar, was in ultimate charge, the very same prison where Joseph was confined. He related how he and his companion both had dreams, and that both had meanings, which Joseph interpreted for them. Sadly he failed to mention that Joseph had told him it was God who gave the interpretation and that it was God

he should have thanked! However, he then went on to tell Pharaoh something very significant (Genesis 41:13): “*And things turned out exactly as he had interpreted them to us: I was restored to my position, and the other man was hanged.*” As the interpretation had come from God, then it could only have turned out exactly as he had revealed, because God is the God of truth, and it is impossible for God to lie. (See Psalm 31:5; Isaiah 45:19; Hebrews 6:18.) And that is an important lesson for us to appreciate and benefit from, for God never goes back on his Word, he never breaks a promise, and is always reliable. There is no safer foundation for us to build our lives on than all that God has spoken to us through his Word, the Bible. While there are many people in the world whose word we cannot trust, that is not so with God, for he is completely reliable. And therefore this should encourage us to take the Bible seriously, and discover for ourselves what God has said by reading and studying it. It should also bring us great security because by trusting in what God has said we know we are secure. For example, he has said that all who call on the name of the Lord will be saved (Romans 10:13), and he will bring all who do trust in the Lord Jesus Christ safely to heaven.

We also cannot help but stand back and marvel at the amazing goodness and sovereignty of God to Joseph in all of this. All that had happened to him, which seemed so adverse and was indeed very hard for him to endure, had all been under Almighty God’s control so that Joseph would be in the right place, at just the right time, so that he could be brought before Pharaoh at this particular juncture.

Many may have been tempted to conclude that all that happened to Joseph was by mere chance, and that it was all so disastrous, but that would be to fail to see the hand of God in it all.

3) Joseph tells Pharaoh God’s interpretation (v14-36).

a. Joseph meets Pharaoh (v14-16)

What must have started like any of the other long days Joseph had experienced in prison, was going to be a day Joseph would remember for the rest of his life. Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, sent for him! Who would have thought when his brothers threw him in that pit thirteen years previously that he would be given an audience with the ruler of Egypt? But as we have already mentioned we see the sovereign hand of God at work, even when to human eyes and understanding it can seem he is nowhere to be seen, and that is a great encouragement to trust God with our lives when the way seems dark and foreboding to us.

We are told little interesting details such as the fact that Joseph had to shave and also change his clothes before seeing Pharaoh (v14). One can only imagine how bedraggled he had looked after his long spell in prison. Pharaoh addressed him with his problem about his dreams stating (v15), “*I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it.*” It is clear that neither the cupbearer nor Pharaoh himself was aware that the Lord God alone could give interpretations of dreams, even though Joseph had specifically told the cupbearer this! They were still governed by superstitious views. It is worth noting that this could have been a temptation for Joseph, because he could have said, ‘Yes’, in answer to

Pharaoh's question, bringing the glory to himself. That's always a danger for us frail human beings when the Lord has been pleased to use us. Pride is always ready to exert itself, and Satan is an expert at exploiting that weakness. However, Joseph did not succumb to that kind of temptation at all, and was swift to tell Pharaoh that God alone could explain the meaning of his dreams (Genesis 41:16): "*I cannot do it,' Joseph replied to Pharaoh, 'but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires.'*" Immediately Joseph gave God the glory, and pointed Pharaoh to the Lord. Indeed, if he had succumbed to that kind of temptation then it would have proved him unfit for the service of the Lord. But those years of difficulty had produced a humble and God-centred heart in Joseph, and he was quick to give God the honour. He had learned what God later revealed through the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 42:8, "*I am the Lord; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols.*" The truth contained in those words were engraved on Joseph's heart. Neither did he use this as an opportunity to get some revenge on the cupbearer for forgetting him, rather he said nothing about that for he knew his life was in the hands of God.

b. The interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams (v17-32).

Pharaoh related his two dreams. First the dream about the seven fat cows being eaten by the seven thin cows, and he added some interesting little details regarding the thin cows. He said in verse 19 that they were "*...scrawny and very ugly and lean. I had never seen such ugly cows in all the land of Egypt.*" Then Pharaoh added in verse 21, "*But*

even after they ate them, no-one could tell that they had done so; they looked just as ugly as before." The dream was very graphic indeed, and the Lord had impressed it deeply on Pharaoh's mind. He then described his dream about the seven fat ears of corn being eaten by the seven thin ears, adding that his magicians could not explain it (v22-24).

At this point Joseph proceeded to tell him the meaning of the two dreams. Indeed, he stated that they both meant the same thing (v25a). And again Joseph clearly directs Pharaoh to God (Genesis 41:25b): "*God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do.*" Joseph was a most faithful ambassador for the Lord and did not manipulate the situation in any way so as to gain honour for himself. He proceeded to tell him that the seven good cows and seven good ears of corn represented a seven year period, and the seven thin cows and seven thin ears also represented seven years, but these would be years of famine (v26-27). And again Joseph directed Pharaoh's attention to God (Genesis 41:28): "*It is just as I said to Pharaoh: God has shown Pharaoh what he is about to do.*" In so doing he was teaching Pharaoh that God is not only one who knows the future but the one who controls it! God was going to act, and there was nothing anyone could do to prevent him. While Pharaoh was the king of Egypt, God was the king of the whole earth! This was another important lesson for Pharaoh to grasp. It is so often the case when men gain great power that they think they rule over everything, and they become proud and conceited and arrogant, often thinking themselves invincible. Pharaoh

was told there is only one who is like that and that is God himself who reigns supreme. Joseph then unfolded God's plan for the next fourteen years in Egypt and the surrounding area. There was first to come a seven year period of great plenty – '*great abundance*' is Joseph's description (v29). This would then be followed by a period of seven years of severe famine (v30). Indeed the famine was going to be so severe that the seven years of plenty would be completely forgotten, so it was clearly going to be a terrible time for everyone. Pharaoh's earlier comment about the condition of the thin cows graphically indicated the severity of this famine. Joseph then made an important comment on the fact that Pharaoh had two dreams about the same events (Genesis 41:32): "*The reason the dream was given to Pharaoh in two forms is that the matter has been firmly decided by God, and God will do it soon.*" The two dreams were God's way of emphasising that this really was what he was going to do, and he was going to do it swiftly. Indeed, this is a principle we find elsewhere in the Bible where a truth is repeated, sometimes even more than twice, to drive home its importance to us. Here are just three examples of the many hundreds we find in the Bible.

- One thinks of the many times the Lord Jesus Christ told his disciples he would have to die and rise again. They were slow to understand what he said, but the inevitability of his death on the cross was being clearly declared (see Matthew 16:21; Mark 10:33-34; Luke 17:25 etc.) and fulfilled in detail.
- Then one thinks of how we are told of the necessity for sinners to repent over their sin and place their trust in

the Lord Jesus Christ to save them (see Luke 24:46-47; Acts 2:38, 16:31, 17:30, 20:21 etc.), and that without repentance and faith no one can be forgiven or reconciled to God.

- In addition there are the many times the Bible teaches us that the Lord Jesus Christ will return again for his followers and will judge the world (see Matthew 16:27; Luke 17:30; John 14:3; Acts 1:11; 1 Corinthians 1:7; 1 Thessalonians 2:19, 4:16; Revelation 1:7, 22:7,12,20), and this event will take place because God has declared it repeatedly to emphasise it to us. Therefore we need to prepare for that day now and be true disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ.

c. The action needed to be taken (v33-36).

Joseph impressed on Pharaoh the need to act upon the Lord's message quickly, and proceeded to tell him what needed to be done in order to save the nation during the years of famine. Someone needed to be put in charge of all the land of Egypt (v33). This was a huge responsibility, and therefore the individual needed to be both discerning and wise. This was not a job any fool could undertake, because it had to be done responsibly. Wise commissioners needed to be appointed over the land to store away a fifth of all the produce during the next seven years of plenty. The produce was then to be kept in the centres of population, the cities. This was to be done with Pharaoh's full authority which would impress on these individuals and the whole nation that this was an absolutely essential policy to prevent starvation crippling the land. This stored produce would then be available for food

during the famine, and thus secure the country from ruin. The wisdom that Joseph displayed through this advice is really quite staggering, and shows he had not allowed himself to vegetate while he was locked away. Having responsibility and caring for the other prisoners had shown him important lessons in management, and he saw what needed to be done and shared that with Pharaoh.

One must also say that this was an incredibly brave thing for Joseph to do, because prisoner slaves were certainly not canvassed for their points of view on the management of the country they were in! Any who presumed to do so could easily be despatched by the executioners, and over the centuries many have suffered death for much less than that. But Joseph saw that thousands of lives were at stake, including Pharaoh's, and therefore declared God's solution with boldness. Joseph is again a challenge to us to speak to others about the Lord and their need of a Saviour before it is too late and no more opportunity is given. We need also to note that Joseph did not promote himself by suggesting Pharaoh chose him. He humbly stands before the king and refuses to manipulate the situation for his own ends in any way whatever. Here was a man who had long learned not only that his life was in God's hands, but that that was the best place for him to be, and what God determined for him was all that mattered. So there is no display of selfish ambition or a desire for political power. He had learned humility under the mighty hand of God (1 Peter 5:6), and he was content to leave the rest with him.

4) Joseph is promoted (v37-40).

As Pharaoh and his officials listened to Joseph's words they come to a unanimous decision that Joseph's plan was good (v39). We must say that this Pharaoh obviously had a concern for his people, and he did not despise instruction and advice. He acted immediately on hearing the Word of God. And it is at this point that Joseph's life is radically and rapidly transformed. Pharaoh had come to the conclusion that there was no one who was quite like Joseph (v38), a man who was endowed with the Spirit of God. The Lord had made it obvious to this heathen king that he was with Joseph as he had been all through the years of his ill treatment and trials. There was certainly no one else in the land to compare with him. Pharaoh added (v39-40), *"Since God has made all this known to you, there is no-one so discerning and wise as you. You shall be in charge of my palace, and all my people are to submit to your orders. Only with respect to the throne will I be greater than you."* This was a rapid rise in anyone's thinking. Joseph was to be honoured by all in the land as the man second to Pharaoh! It was totally unexpected, and it is certain that when Joseph awoke that morning this was not something that had occurred to him, and yet here he becomes the prime minister of Egypt!

We must say that Joseph had proved himself to the Lord throughout his long years of adversity. Any of those early evidences of pride he displayed when he related his dream to his brothers and father had long since gone. He had learned humility and perseverance as he endured appalling treatment from his family, his master's wife, and Pharaoh's cupbearer. He had developed a deep trust in the Lord God

and desired to serve him and give glory to him in whatever way he could, even before the highest man in Egypt. And we have seen him as a dependable man who worked hard whether in the comfort of Potiphar's home or in the confines of the king's prison. Here was a man whose life had been refined in the crucible of suffering and who proved absolutely faithful to God when others would have concluded God had let him down. And now was God's time to use him in a powerful way for the saving of many thousands, if not millions of lives. The Christian writer A.W. Tozer once wrote this: *"It is doubtful whether God can bless a man greatly until he has hurt him deeply."* (p137 - The Roots of the Righteousness.) When Job went through his trials, and when he could not discern the hand of God in them, he still was able to declare these words (Job 23:10-11): *"But he knows the way I take; when he has tested me, I shall come forth as gold. My feet have closely followed his steps; I have kept to his way without turning aside."* This was also true for Joseph who had been tried and tested by God for thirteen years, and now he was ready to be used by the Lord, for God honours those who honour him (1 Samuel 2:30). God's ways are indeed higher than our ways and his thoughts higher than ours (Isaiah 55:9).

There is so much that we have seen in Joseph's life that was even more true of the Lord Jesus Christ, as the book of Hebrews states (Hebrews 5:8-10): *"Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek."*

Chapter 5 Genesis 41:41-57 Joseph's promotion

We saw in the previous chapter how Joseph faithfully declared God's interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams. There would be seven years of plenty followed by seven years of extreme famine. This was going to require much preparation so that during the good years enough food could be stored away to provide sufficient for the nation during the famine years. Joseph had suggested that a fifth of each year's produce should be collected while there was plenty so as to provide adequately for the seven years of lack, and that fifth would allow for some wastage and also a bit extra should other nations need help. Joseph's suggestion that someone should be appointed to oversee this enormous task was recognised by Pharaoh and his officials as sound advice. So Pharaoh acted upon it immediately appointing Joseph to the task. This was because Pharaoh had discerned that the Spirit of God was in him, and that there was therefore no one as wise as Joseph was. This was an amazing turn of events, and for Joseph a dramatic change in his circumstances. It must have surprised Joseph as he heard Pharaoh's decision to put him in charge of this great and noble work. Indeed, Pharaoh had said that Joseph would become the second most important person in Egypt next to the king himself.

1) Joseph's amazing change of position (Genesis 41:41-45)

a. The outward marks of his new authority.

Joseph was placed in total charge of the whole land of Egypt (Genesis 41:41). He was then given three things

which indicated he had been given royal authority for the work he had to accomplish (cf. similar marks of office in Esther 3:10, 6:11; Daniel 5:7,16,29). Pharaoh removed his own signet ring from his hand and placed it on Joseph's finger (Genesis 41:42a). These rings were used for impressing seals on letters and instructions to emphasise their authority, importance and need to be followed out in detail. Pharaoh dressed him in suitable clothing – royal robes 'of fine linen' (Genesis 41:42b). Egypt was very famous for its fine textiles and linen robes were considered most elegant. Pharaoh placed a chain of office around his neck (Genesis 41:42c), which was made of gold. In addition Joseph was given a chariot of his own (Genesis 41:43a). This was the most outstanding means of transport of that time for those in high position, the equivalent today of having your own helicopter or plane or luxurious car. This marked him out to all who saw him as the second in command in the nation. Also, men would shout before him, 'Make way' (Genesis 41:43b), which probably indicates men would bow before him in acknowledgement of his exalted position and importance. And all of this together meant Joseph was in charge of the whole land of Egypt, and everyone who saw him would be in no doubt as to who and what he was (Genesis 41:43c).

What a transformation of circumstances this was for Joseph! Those years of suffering in which he served God, and patiently and humbly persevered and trusted in God, were now rewarded. Never again in all his long life of a hundred and ten years would he return to slavery or prison. It was indeed a remarkable chain of events. What was true

during those years of adversity (see 39:3,21), and which perhaps was not obvious to the human eye, was now plain for all to see. The Lord was with Joseph, and now after all this time everything was beginning to fit into place in God's great plan and purposes.

b. The foreshadowing of what happened to Christ.

All of this is very suggestive of one who knew greater suffering than Joseph ever knew, and who experienced an exaltation greater than he enjoyed – the Lord Jesus Christ himself. The apostle Paul has outlined the depths of affliction the Lord Jesus Christ endured, and the heights of exaltation he now enjoys because of his faithfulness during his days of suffering (Philippians 2:5-11): *"Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."* In a small and inadequate way, Joseph's own life was a shadow of what was to happen to an infinitely greater degree in the Lord Jesus Christ. Joseph did not have to suffer unto death, but Jesus did. Joseph was only exalted in Egypt, but Jesus has been exalted in heaven and rules over the whole of creation, including things visible and invisible, and he

rules over all for the benefit of all his people wherever they are (see Ephesians 1:20-22).

c. Encouragement for Christian believers today.

Joseph is also an illustration of God's dealings with every faithful Christian believer, and we must think of this in two ways.

i. In our present lives.

He reminds us that God is always with us in our afflictions and disappointments and trials. And more than that, very often the Lord refines us over years in order to bring us out of our trials and into greater service for him. This is a great encouragement for us to do as Paul instructed the Philippian Christians (Philippians 4:6-7): *“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”* How relevant are those words, because it is so often in our minds that we face the most turmoil when we are going through difficult days. We are all prone to worry, and some more than others, but here we are assured that by casting ourselves unreservedly on the Lord he will fill our hearts and minds with his peace.

There is something very important we need to be careful about so as not to misunderstand what the Lord is teaching us through Joseph's life. **It does not mean** that in this life every Christian will **always** enjoy eventual freedom from all suffering and trial and hardship, but **it does mean** the Lord will not forsake us during those days of need. There

are many examples in the Bible itself to help us have a balanced view of this issue. Indeed, sometimes being prepared for the Lord's service through adversity and then being given work to do for the Lord can expose us to even greater difficulties and heartaches than before! Read through the book of Acts for many examples where God's servants were persecuted. Indeed, only two weeks before I wrote these words news reached us of a servant of the Lord being burnt to death with his two young sons simply because he was sharing the love of Christ with others! Sometimes the Lord does bring wonderful changes in our outward circumstances in this life, though not always, **but he will never ever forsake us.**

ii. In the life to come.

There is something the Lord will do for every faithful disciple of Christ, and of which Joseph really stands as a type. Although we will have trouble while in this world, as Jesus said in John 16:33, if we faithfully endure to the end we shall be saved (Mark 13:13). When our earthly life comes to an end and our earthly trials are over, we shall be exalted to heaven itself. That is why we are commanded constantly to look to our Saviour and are urged to follow him faithfully, even unto death. For example, we read in Hebrews 12:2, *“Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”* And Jesus himself declared in Revelation 3:21, *“To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne.”*

What a marvellous future each true believer has, and what an encouragement for us to continue following and serving our Lord faithfully, even though it often means the way is hard and difficult for us. In the end we shall reign with Christ on his throne! What a mercy!

d. Pharaoh's final pronouncements (Genesis 41:44-45).

First Pharaoh declared verbally the scope of Joseph's authority and responsibility, and we must say that Pharaoh's actions here were quite staggering (Genesis 41:44): *"I am Pharaoh, but without your word no-one will lift hand or foot in Egypt."* Joseph was in absolute control of everyone in Egypt except the king himself. It was a most unusual authority to be endowed with, and again is illustrative of the much more superior and extensive authority that has been given to the Lord Jesus Christ which is absolute in heaven and on earth (see Matthew 28:18).

The second thing Pharaoh did was to give Joseph an Egyptian name – Zaphenath-Paneah (Genesis 41:45a). There is considerable uncertainty as to the precise meaning of this name, but many think it was related to one of the Egyptian idols called Neith. This was similar to what happened to Daniel and his three friends in Babylon (see Daniel 1:7). This would therefore indicate that Pharaoh had not come to trust in the Lord as Joseph had, even though Joseph had told him about God and he acknowledged God's Spirit was in Joseph. Many in our world will accept that Christian believers belong to Christ and that Christ has blessed and changed and used them, but

they never come to seek him for themselves. That is very sad.

The next thing Pharaoh did was to give Joseph a wife (Genesis 41:45b). She was named Asenath the daughter of Potiphera, the priest of On, so she came from a prominent family in Egyptian cultural and religious circles. Her name means 'one belonging to Neith', an Egyptian goddess, and her father's name meant he was a worshipper of Ra the Egyptian sun god and for which the city of On was a centre of worship. ('On' was called Heliopolis by the Greeks and is situated around 15 km N.E. from modern day Cairo.)

So, very clearly, Joseph was brought to great prominence and would now be a man very much in the public eye. Such a transformation and responsibility is awesome to contemplate even now thousands of years later, so what it must actually have been for Joseph was immense. His every word and action would be watched and whatever he did or did not do would come under the scrutiny of the public eye. There would be those who supported and, no doubt, those who did not and would have been quick to criticise him, at least privately if not publicly. But there are two important lessons for us to grasp.

i. Joseph's youthfulness did not disqualify him from usefulness to God.

First, Joseph was only thirty when this great responsibility came to him. Youth does not preclude us from usefulness in the world and especially in the Lord's service. Very often the young are despised, and this led Paul to write about it to Timothy (1 Timothy 4:12): *"Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an*

example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity.” It takes much grace for older believers to accept the leadership of those younger than themselves, and it takes grace for younger believers not to use their leadership as an excuse to lord it over older believers but to love and respect them. Joseph did not succumb to misusing his position even though he was young.

ii. Joseph’s character was not crushed by responsibility.

It could well have overwhelmed him or filled his heart with arrogant pride, or even caused him to forsake the Lord for the gods of Egypt. But Joseph had already proved himself in the Lord’s eyes, and God knew he was now ready for this weighty position and could be trusted with it. Over the centuries many who have prospered in their work have found it to be a snare to them as their desires for spiritual matters and the things of Christ have taken second place to their newfound wealth and status. (See Luke 8:14; 1 Timothy 6:6-10,17-18.) There is nothing intrinsically wrong with prospering in our work or of having riches in themselves, but it is how we respond to and use them that counts with the Lord. There are dangers that can be disastrous for us. How good to know Joseph was not seduced by his new position to go away from the Lord. Therefore we need not only to pray for the poor and needy of the Lord’s people, but also for the wealthy and powerful: both face pressures and dangers to depart from the Lord! We need to ask ourselves if the Lord, who knows the secrets of every heart, could find that he can entrust us to work for him with humility and diligence and

trust. Joseph’s utter integrity again presents a great challenge to us.

e. A significant biographical statement (Genesis 41:46a).

Joseph was aged thirty when he entered Pharaoh’s service reminding us again that God’s dealings with him did not happen overnight. There were those years of preparation and testing that led up to this. This also teaches us that when God determines to bless someone nothing can prevent him from doing so, and years of opposition, difficulties and injustices cannot frustrate his purposes. More than that, God will even use these adversities to bring the blessing to us. Joseph’s brothers little realised the day they sold him as a slave that their wicked action was being overruled by God to bring Joseph to Egypt for the very purpose of becoming the second in the kingdom! This is so reassuring because God’s great purpose for Christian believers today is to bring *‘many sons to glory’* according to Hebrews 2:10, and that glorious plan cannot be frustrated. And the encouragement followers of the Lord Jesus Christ gain from Joseph is that even the very worst of earthly trials and difficulties will not only not endure for ever, but neither will they stop the Lord bringing us to heaven. For those believers today who are racked with pain because of illness, for those in the midst of great deprivation and poverty, for those going through fierce persecution for Christ’s sake and which may well result in them losing their lives, Joseph stands as a great encouragement for us, because none of these things is able to separate us from the love of God shown to us in the Lord

Jesus Christ, and none of these things will prevent God bringing us to heaven. Therefore what an encouragement this is to persevere in our walk with the Lord, and what consolation this brings to our troubled hearts and minds. Indeed, as I write, news has come of a young thirteen year old girl who became a true disciple of Christ, but was then tragically murdered by her own parents for becoming a Christian believer. What great comfort it is to know that the Lord has now brought her to heaven and glory, and her parents' dreadfully wicked actions could not prevent God doing that. We pray these very parents and others like them will see their own need to become Christian believers.

2) Joseph's diligent work (Genesis 41:45-49).

a. His instant response (Genesis 41:45-46).

We are told twice within a few sentences that Joseph went out of Pharaoh's presence and travelled throughout the land of Egypt (Genesis 41:45-46). He began his work immediately, and wisely made a survey of the land to see the extent of the farming regions and the conditions of the crop growing that existed. He also needed to see what facilities already existed for storage in the cities. He needed this kind of information in order to work out his policy of storing one fifth of the produce grown over the next seven years. He gave the work his personal touch and entered upon it with enthusiasm, just as he had done in both Potiphar's house and in the prison. There was a wonderful consistency in this godly man's character, and that reminds us how Christian believers are instructed in the Bible to be faithful in our daily work, doing it diligently and with

integrity for the Lord (Ephesians 6:5-8): "*Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favour when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free.*" (See also Colossians 3:22-25.) Indeed, idleness is considered a great sin, as Paul, Silas and Timothy intimated in Paul's second letter to the Thessalonian Church (2 Thessalonians 3:6-15): "*In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, labouring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow. For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: 'If a man will not work, he shall not eat.'*"

We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the bread they eat. And as for you, brothers, never tire of doing what is right.

If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. Ye do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.” Some are unable to find work and would love the opportunity to be employed, but it is not those that Paul has written about. His instruction concerns those who do not want to work and who are lazy. No Christian believer should be characterised like that! Joseph’s actions not only indicate what a wise and diligent man he was, but also the sense of urgency he felt because the lives of thousands of people were at stake, even though most of them were totally unaware of it at the time. And we see another challenge that Joseph sets before us, because how urgently do we see the need to ensure the spread of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ in our world? We live in a world whose population is in the billions, and the vast majority of these people do not realise that they face a danger far greater than the seven years of famine that was coming to Egypt. They face the judgment of God which has eternal consequences. Billions are living without any awareness of how their sinfulness is an abomination to the Lord, and will result in his solemn condemnation on the judgment at the last day. On that day they will hear those dreadful words from the Lord that are recorded for us in several places in the New Testament: (Matthew 7:23) *“I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!”* (Matthew 25:41) *“Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”* (Luke 13:27-28) *“I do not know you or where you come*

from. Away from me, you evildoers! There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out.” (See also Isaiah 66:24; Matthew 3:12, 5:22; Mark 9:43,48; Luke 3:17,18; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-3; 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10; Jude 7; 2 Peter 2:4.) And the only thing that will keep anyone from this dreadful end in hell is if they repent of their sin and turn to the Lord Jesus Christ, trusting in what he accomplished through his death on the cross and his glorious resurrection to deal with their sin. Therefore what urgency there is for us to share these facts with others, and to share God’s solution for sin, the precious cleansing blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. (See 1 Peter 1:18-19; 1 John 1:7-10.) This is something we are commanded to do by the Lord Jesus Christ our Saviour. (See Matthew 28:19-20; Luke 24:46-48; Acts 1:8; Romans 10:14-15 etc.) How slow we are to take up this God-given task at times. How little love and concern we seem to have for those lost in their sin. How many are our excuses for not engaging in this work. Joseph rebukes our sloth for he engaged in his work as soon as it was given him to do, and so should we.

b. Joseph’s Diligent Work (Genesis 41:47-49)

Over the whole of the next seven years Joseph laboured hard and long to store up food from the good harvests in preparation for the famine to follow. We are told he used the cities as sites for the storehouses, and we see his wisdom again here for these were the centres where the population was concentrated and the need would be greatest. It was also easier for people to travel into the

cities than for Joseph to arrange for provisions to be taken to the outlying villages, some of which would have been quite remote. He was also completely fair to each city because he collected only the food grown in its surrounding fields and did not treat any one place with partiality or favouritism. Indeed too much was at stake here, as thousands of lives hung on what Joseph did. How sad that in many places today, those in high position are corrupt and are only concerned with making money for themselves and their families and abuse their position and trust. All such individuals need to remember that they will one day have to give account to God for their corrupt ways, and solemnly they will not escape his justice. There is a saying that ‘power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.’ This did not happen to Joseph, and he stands as a testimony to both his own faithfulness to God and also to God’s keeping and sanctifying power. While we read in 1 Corinthians 1 that ‘*not many noble*’ are found in the kingdom of heaven, it does not say ‘not any noble’ will be found amongst God’s people. Some believers are in high position and we need to pray for them and take care that we do not despise them because we are jealous of their position.

The Lord so blessed the land of Egypt during these years of plenty, and Joseph was so diligent in this work, that we read that the amounts he stored were colossal (Genesis 41:49): “*Joseph stored up huge quantities of grain, like the sand of the sea; it was so much that he stopped keeping records because it was beyond measure.*” This not only shows how hard and faithfully Joseph worked, but also that

God’s word to Pharaoh through his dreams was indeed being fulfilled exactly as he said it would be. And what an encouragement it is for us to be reminded again that all God has said in his Word the Bible will come true. Jesus said (Matthew 24:35), “*Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.*” (See also Mark 13:31; Luke 21:33.)

3) Joseph’s own family (Genesis 41:50-52).

We are given a little glimpse of Joseph’s own domestic circumstances throughout this busy seven-year period. The Lord not only prospered Joseph at work but also at home. He gave Joseph and his wife Asenath two sons. The first of these was Manasseh, and Joseph supplies the reason for that choice of name (Genesis 41:51): “*It is because the Lord has made me forget all my trouble and all my father’s household.*” The name Manasseh comes from the Hebrew root ‘to forget’. It was a recognition of the Lord’s goodness to him, and of the lavishness of that goodness in that it made him forget those long years of difficulty he had previously been through. His second son was called Ephraim, and again Joseph informs us why he had chosen this name (Genesis 41:52): “*It is because God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering.*” The name Ephraim comes from the Hebrew root for ‘twice fruitful’. It was a further means of acknowledging Joseph’s thankfulness to God for his blessing on his life. He thanked God without pride, refusing to take any of the praise for all that had happened, and determined to give it all to the Lord. It is significant that Joseph spoke of his past as “*all my trouble*” and that Egypt was “*the land of*

my suffering". These terms help us to understand that Joseph felt the pain and heartache of those years very deeply. And that in turn makes the way he handled them all the more admirable. Just because the Lord was with him throughout these trials did not mean that they were any less difficult to have to endure. They were not easy years for Joseph. Neither did he go through them in a stoic fashion, but felt them keenly. But that only stirred his heart to thank God even more for bringing him out of that time and for blessing him so abundantly. It was the Lord's doing and it was marvellous in his eyes (cf. Psalm 118:23). And again Joseph challenges us to be thankful to the Lord for all his kindness to us. When Paul wrote about the way the Lord Jesus Christ delivers people from their slavery to sin, he just had to praise and thank God for this in Ephesians 1, and then he went on to speak of the lavish way God has been kind to us (Ephesians 1:7-8): *"In him (i.e. Christ) we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding."* Just as God had lavished his goodness on Joseph, so he has done the same to all who believe in Christ. How much we have to praise God for if we are disciples of Jesus.

Another significant thing to note is that Asenath was the mother of both Joseph's sons. His was not a polygamous marriage (ie. one man with more than one wife), but monogamous (i.e. one man with only one wife), just as God intended at the creation of the world (Genesis 2:24), and which Jesus reinforced in Matthew 19:5.

4) Joseph as the famine strikes (Genesis 41:53-57).

Just as God said the years of plenty would cease so they did, and they were followed by seven years of famine exactly as God had declared. The famine was not restricted to Egypt, but many of the surrounding nations also suffered, but they had not had the foresight of a Joseph among them, and so were forced to come to Egypt to buy grain. We see from this how wise Joseph was to store a fifth of the previous seven years' produce, rather than just a seventh. There was enough and to spare so that other nations might be provided for. This also enriched the Egyptian treasury and brought profit to the nation when there was no other means of increasing trade. As the famine took hold the people in Egypt cried out to Pharaoh for help, and he directed them to Joseph, who had, under the good hand of God, become the saviour of the people for this time. And having been told where to go for their food the people did not hesitate or complain or grumble or argue. They were glad and must have been considerably relieved that Joseph had sufficient stocks to feed them. So in this new crisis there was hope because God had acted.

We can learn a lesson from Pharaoh during this period because he knew he could not save the people, but he knew the man who could, Joseph. Therefore he directed them to him. Compare how similar to this is the task of the followers of Christ today. For many people they are spiritually in a famine. Because of the sinfulness of the human heart they have no peace, no hope, no joy. God seems distant to them, and they have no assurance over their future and are completely unprepared to face death

and the judgment that follows it. They have tried so many of the world's slick answers at meeting these deep seated needs, and have filled their lives with pleasure or money or sex or drugs or a host of other things, but inside they are as dry and spiritually famished as before. We need to point them to the only one who has the solution to their needs, the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the Saviour of the world, the only one that God has sent into the world to save sinners. Jesus described himself like this in John 6:35, *"I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty."* It is to him that we must point men and women, old and young, just as Pharaoh pointed the hungry people of his day to Joseph. But there is one significant difference, namely those who go to Christ do not have to pay for his mercy and salvation; he gives it to us freely! Through Isaiah the prophet, the Lord told us about the free salvation found in Christ many hundreds of years before Jesus was born (Isaiah 55:1-3): *"Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labour on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. Give ear and come to me; hear me that your soul may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David..."*

Another lesson is one we can learn from Joseph. He did not hoard the food just for himself, nor even only for Pharaoh and his family and officials. He did not take

advantage of the privileges he now enjoyed. He made the food available for all who needed it. How unselfish and compassionate a man he was, a man of real integrity, as we have already seen! Compare how these qualities are seen in their supreme example in Christ, who laid down his life for others. He gives us help in our times of need. He gives strength when we are weak. He gives wisdom. He gives us comfort in our trials and sorrows. He gives us the ability to love those who hate us. Paul sums it up well when in Romans 8:32 he writes, *"He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also along with him (ie. the Lord Jesus Christ) graciously give us all things."* Returning to Joseph, we can say he was a man who knew he was accountable to God for the way he lived. This was true for him when in adversity, and it was true of him now in his new circumstances of prosperity, and so he lived each day for the Lord. What was true for Joseph is true for us. We are all accountable to God for the way we live our lives, whatever our outward circumstances may be, whether favourable or difficult. Indeed, that accountability is so extensive that Jesus said in Matthew 12:36, *"...I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken."* May God make us into men and women like Joseph. And if we are unlike him, and have failed and misused our lives, then we need to repent of all our wrong doing, and seek the grace and mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ to pardon our sins and to transform our lives so that we do live in a way that pleases God. (See Acts 2:38 and 2 Corinthians 5:17.)

The fact that Genesis 41 ends with the words, “*the famine was severe in all the world*” prepares us for the next fascinating stage in God’s dealings with Joseph, because the famine even affected Canaan, the land where his father and brothers were living! This is where we will begin in volume 2.

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