

How to Handle Life's Interruptions

Session 2

October 26, 2025

When Life Goes Terribly Wrong

The Point: Even hard interruptions place us where God can use us.

Session Passages: Genesis 39:21-23; 40:5-8; 41:10-14

Genesis 39:21-23

Connection to the Point. Even though Joseph was imprisoned, he still experienced the presence and favor of God.

Joseph was the great grandson of Abraham and the eleventh son of Jacob. In the early part of his life, God gave Joseph two dreams that pointed to God using him for a special purpose. These dreams brought resentment from his older brothers. That resentment was heightened by the fact that Joseph was the favorite of their father, Jacob (37:1-11).

Initially, God's plan to use Joseph in a special way appeared to be thwarted when his brothers sold Joseph into the hands of an Egypt-bound caravan (vv. 12-36). Through God's providence, Joseph was sold to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh and captain of the guards. Joseph quickly rose to become Potiphar's most trusted slave, but once again Joseph's life was interrupted by a false accusation of Potiphar's wife. As a result, Joseph was thrown in prison (39:1-20).

The Lord was with Joseph (v. 21). Despite Joseph's seemingly grim circumstances, the Lord was with Joseph and extended kindness to him by granting him the favor of the prison warden. A form of this phrase appears four times in this chapter in relation to Joseph's elevation in Potiphar's household (vv. 2,3) and the prison (vv. 21,23). Similar language is used elsewhere in the Old Testament concerning Joshua (Josh. 6:27), the young prophet Samuel (1 Sam. 3:19), David (18:12,14,28), and others. In all these instances, the presence of God indicated the Lord was working in the lives of these people to grant them some form of outward success in their lives.

The pinnacle of Joseph's elevation would come after he interpreted Pharaoh's dreams (Gen. 41:1-36). Pharaoh made Joseph his second in command so as to oversee the preparations for the coming famine in Egypt (vv. 37-45). Pharaoh noted that Joseph had "God's spirit in him" (v. 38).

The presence of the Holy Spirit differed somewhat between the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament, the Spirit temporarily descended on a person to give that individual wisdom and power to carry out specific assignments. In the time of the New Testament and moving forward to the present, the Holy Spirit permanently indwells Christians at the moment they place their faith in Christ (Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 6:19-20; Eph. 1:11-14). The presence and working of the Spirit in every believer leads to the demonstration of His fruit in that person's life as he or she is transformed more and more into the likeness of Christ (Rom. 8:29; 12:2; Gal. 5:16,22-25).

Prison warden (v. 21). The Hebrew term for *warden* means "chief" or "prince" and is used to describe someone who has rule over a specific sphere of government or life (for example, religious, political, military). It is the same word used of Potiphar, who was the "captain" of the guards (v. 1). It was used

later for Pharaoh's "chief" cupbearer and "chief" baker (40:2). This prison warden was the chief of the prison.

Prison (v. 21). The term for *prison* literally means "round house." The same term appears earlier to describe the "household" of Potiphar (39:2). Prisons developed over time. In the law codes of early ancient civilizations there was often no provision for imprisonment. Among the ancient Hebrews, prisons did not exist. The Mosaic law contains no reference to imprisonment. While at times individuals were taken into custody and detained until God's will could be ascertained, this was not a formal imprisonment.

What prisons developed in ancient times were under control of nations' kings and often were used to punish political prisoners. The treatment of those incarcerated often varied according to the nature of the offense. Those in prison might be used as slave labor, tortured, or held while awaiting trial. Some examples of the nature of imprisonment and prisons in biblical times are those of Sampson (Judg. 16:21) and Jeremiah (Jer. 37:15-21; 38:4-13). The normal punishment for rape or attempted rape in Egypt was death. There is speculation that Joseph did not suffer more severely due to Potiphar perhaps not being completely convinced concerning Joseph's guilt. However, as throughout his life, Joseph not receiving a harsher punishment was ultimately due to God's presence and favor in his life.

Genesis 40:5-8

Connection to the Point. Imprisonment was no barrier for Joseph in being used by God to interpret dreams.

Context. In every monarchy, those who attend to the king's needs serve at his favor. One false step and the consequences could be fatal. Genesis 40:1-4 tells of the chief cupbearer and the chief baker to Pharaoh who fell out of favor with the king and were incarcerated in prison with Joseph. Joseph had been given authority over all the prisoners by the prison warden (39:21-22) and was made the attendant to the cupbearer and baker by the captain of the guards (40:4). This set the stage for Joseph's ascent from slave to second-in-command over all of Egypt.

Cupbearer and baker (v. 5) both are described with the adjective "chief" (v. 2). The two high-ranking officials in the court of the Egyptian Pharaoh were responsible for the king's drink and food respectively. The *chief cupbearer* was responsible for serving the king wine and tasting it (and perhaps his food) to ensure it was not poisoned. The *chief cupbearer* would have had the responsibility of overseeing a staff. He was also probably responsible for the royal vineyards and wine cellars. The *chief baker* would have been responsible for all the food prepared and served in Pharaoh's court. He too would have supervised many servants.

The offenses of these two men are not stated. Whether it was conspiracy or just failure to please Pharaoh in the execution of their duties is unknown. The fact that the eventual outcome was different for the two men suggests that the actions for which they were being punished were different as well. What is definitively stated is whom they offended: "their master, the king of Egypt" (v. 1).

Dreams (v. 5). In this context, a *dream* is more than what most people experience when they sleep. The dreams of the cupbearer and the baker were both prophetic in the sense that they provided glimpses into the futures of the men who dreamed them. Dreams play a significant role throughout the Joseph narrative. In addition to these two royal officials, Joseph had dreams which foretold his eventual elevation over his family (37:5-11). The dreams of Pharaoh concerning the coming famine led to Joseph's elevation over all of Egypt (41:1-45). All these dreams came from God.

In the ancient Near East, dreams of the common people were viewed as important, as were dreams of kings and priests which were understood as regarding the future of entire nations. Dreams at times played an important role in the Old Testament. God spoke through dreams and visions (Job 33:15-17). Among those who heard from God through dreams were King Abimelech of Gerar (Gen. 20:3-7), Jacob (28:12-15), Laban (31:24), and King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon (Dan. 2). The New Testament records Joseph having such dreams instructing him to take Mary as his wife (Matt. 1:20-21), to flee to Egypt with Mary and the baby Jesus (2:13), as well as instructing him to return to Israel when his family was no longer in danger (vv. 19-20).

While pagan nations often had specific individuals and groups dedicated to the interpretation of dreams, Scripture designates the interpretation of dreams as an ability given to individuals by God, such as Joseph and the prophet Daniel. Both attributed their ability to interpret dreams as being from God (Gen. 40:8; 41:16; Dan. 2:28). Not every dream was viewed as being of significance and not every dream needed an interpreter. Some were simple dreams with plain meanings. Others were symbolic and could be readily understood. Still others used complex imagery which required one with the special ability of interpretation to be understood.

Each dream had its own meaning (v. 5). Both the cupbearer and the baker having had dreams on the same night would have been viewed as an omen. When Joseph asked about their saddened countenances, he soon learned of their dreams and the lack of anyone who could interpret them. Both men were grieved that there was "no one to interpret" their dreams (v. 8). Joseph was quick to point out that interpretations belong to God (v. 8).

Interpretation of dreams was an important undertaking in ancient Egypt. The presence of professional magicians or interpreters was believed necessary for solving the riddles of dreams. The interpreters of dreams in Egypt and Assyria both created "dream books" which were compilations of the various symbols of dreams and their meanings. Joseph, however, rejected this method. He recognized that God was the Source of the dreams and therefore He was also the Source of their interpretations. God used the dreams of these two men as a means of carrying out His purposes in bringing Joseph to power in Egypt (41:9-15).

Genesis 41:10-14

Connection to the Point. Because Joseph had interpreted an earlier dream, it opened the door to a greater opportunity: to interpret Pharaoh's dream.

Context. The cupbearer and the baker both shared their dreams with Joseph. The interpretation of the chief cupbearer's dream indicated that in three days he would be restored to his position in Pharaoh's court (40:12-13). Joseph was quick to appeal to the cupbearer to speak to Pharaoh concerning Joseph in

hope that he could also be released from prison (vv. 14-15). Unfortunately, when the cupbearer was restored to his position, he forgot Joseph (vv. 20-21,23). The cupbearer did not remember Joseph for two years until Pharaoh himself had two dreams which no one could interpret. In contrast, the interpretation of the chief baker's dream pointed to his execution at the order of Pharaoh (vv. 16-19). When the chief cupbearer was elevated back to his position, the chief baker was hanged (v. 22).

At the end of two years, Pharaoh had two dreams which troubled him. He summoned all the magicians and wise men of Egypt in the hopes that they could interpret the dreams (41:1-8). Magicians were occult practitioners who were thought to be able to interpret dreams. They produced "dream books" which contained the meanings of symbols for interpreting dreams. The same term is used for the "magicians" who attempted to duplicate the miracles of Moses in the time of the exodus (Ex. 7:11,22; 8:7,18-19; 9:11). The wise men were most likely trained court advisors to the Pharaoh thought to be gifted by the gods with intelligence and wisdom (see Ex. 7:11).

A young Hebrew (v. 12). Genesis 37:2 indicates that Joseph was sold into slavery at about seventeen years of age. When he was thirty years old, Pharaoh made Joseph second in command over Egypt after he successfully interpreted the king's dreams (41:46). Thus approximately thirteen years had passed between his brothers selling him into slavery and his appearance in Pharaoh's court.

The chief cupbearer described Joseph as a young *Hebrew*. The origin of the term is uncertain. It may mean "a descendant of Eber," who was a descendant of Noah's son Shem (10:21). *Eber* means "the opposite side." Or *Hebrew* could be derived from the fact that Abram (Abraham) crossed over the Euphrates River on his journey to Canaan. The Hebrew phrase that speaks of "crossing over," or "beyond, on the other side," is very similar to the word *Hebrew*.

The first occurrence of *Hebrew* appears in Genesis 14:13, where it is used to distinguish Abram/Abraham from the other racial groups in the region of Canaan. It was also used of Abraham's descendants (40:15; 43:32), the Israelites as Egyptian slaves (Ex. 1:22), in relation to the Lord being "the God of the Hebrews" (3:18), and the nation during the time of Samuel (1 Sam. 4:6,9), Saul (13:3,7), and David (29:3).

Sometimes the term is used in a derogatory sense. For example, Potiphar's wife referred to Joseph as "a Hebrew man" and "the Hebrew slave" when lying to the household servants and Potiphar (Gen. 39:14,17).

God changed the patriarch Jacob's name to *Israel* (32:28). Over time the descendants of Jacob gradually adopted *Israel* as the designation for themselves and their nation. The identifier *Hebrew* is not found in the historical books after 1 Samuel 29:3. Apart from a few references in the prophets (Jer. 34:9,14,17; Jonah 1:9) and Paul's reference to himself (Phil. 3:5), the term is only used in relation to the Hebrew language (2 Kings 18:26,28; 2 Chron. 32:18; Neh. 13:24; Isa. 36:11,13; Rev. 9:11; 16:16).

Slave of the captain of the guards (v. 12). Joseph was imprisoned "where the king's prisoners were confined" (39:20). The place of incarceration is identified as "the house of the captain of the guards" (40:3). Potiphar is identified as the "captain of the guards" (37:36). Thus, it is possible that Joseph went from his position as manager over Potiphar's household to prisoner in an area of the same complex for which Potiphar was responsible.

Restored . . . hanged (v. 13). At the time Joseph interpreted the dreams of the chief cupbearer and chief baker, he used a Hebrew phrase translated “will lift up your head” to describe the Pharaoh’s actions toward both men (40:13,19). This was a common idiom for someone offering favor to another (see Ps. 3:3). While the cupbearer was lifted up in the sense of being *restored* to his former position in Pharaoh’s court, the baker was lifted up in a different sense. As Joseph foretold, “Pharaoh will lift up your head—from off you—and hang you on a tree” (Gen. 40:19).

Dungeon (v. 14) is also called “prison” (39:20). The Hebrew term can have the meaning of a pit, cistern, or well. Cisterns were large underground empty spaces used to store water. The royal dungeon may have used converted cisterns for holding prisoners. This particular dungeon was apparently attached to the housing complex of the captain of the guards (40:3).