

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, September 20, 2009**

DREAMS OF ABUNDANCE AND POVERTY

Genesis 41:1-16

When we last saw Joseph, he had been thrown in jail as a result of false accusations against him made by the wife of Potiphar. While there, God gave him the interpretation of the dreams of Pharaoh's chief cupbearer and chief baker. But when the cupbearer was restored to his former position in Pharaoh's court, even though Joseph had asked him to speak to Pharaoh on his behalf, the cupbearer forgot all about Joseph. That is how Genesis 40 ends. It says in verse 23: "The chief cupbearer, however, did not remember Joseph. He forgot him."

So Joseph remained in jail. Forgotten. Forgotten by the cupbearer, but not by God. As we said last week, Joseph was forgotten but not forgotten. God did not forget him. Though the cupbearer did not remember him, God did. God was with him in prison. And even if Joseph couldn't see what God was doing, God was still at work in his life. God was still in charge.

You may wonder: What relevance does this have for us today? How does it apply to my life? It applies in just this way: You may be dealing with a really hard thing in your life. You may feel like you're in a prison of some kind. Maybe it is an illness or some chronic health problem. Maybe it is your job. Or your need for a job. Maybe you're in debt over your head and you feel like there is no way out. Maybe your marriage feels like a prison. Or your family life. Maybe you have experienced so much hurt that healing and reconciliation seem impossible. Maybe you struggle with depression and sometimes it feels like a prison for you.

I wish I could tell you there is an easy answer for the hard thing you are going through. Most likely there isn't. But that doesn't mean that God has forgotten you. He has not. And He will not. I'm absolutely, positively sure about that. God did not forget about Joseph. And He will not forget about you. God was with Joseph while Joseph was doing his time. And God is with you. Right now. You may not be able to see what God is doing, or why He is allowing you to go through this hard time. You may not be able to feel God's presence or understand His plan, but He is with you.

What you are going through may well grieve God's heart, especially if you have been mistreated by someone, or if you are being mistreated in some way. God Himself may be angry at what you are going through. And you may wonder, just as I'm sure Joseph must have wondered, why God doesn't do something right now. I don't know the answer. I won't pretend I have the answer. But I am still certain of this: God has not forgotten you. He is with you. He will be with you. He will walk beside you all the way. And God is still sovereign. He is still in charge.

After Joseph interpreted the dreams of the cupbearer and the baker, and his interpretations came true, Joseph spent two more years stuck in jail (Genesis 41:1). Two full years passed. Two years is a long time to be forgotten, isn't it? Two years is a long time to be stuck in jail. Two years is a long time to wait when it seems like nothing is happening. Two years is a long

time to be in prison, regardless of what kind of prison you're in. Hundreds of years later, after he was forced to flee Egypt when he killed an Egyptian for mistreating a Hebrew (Exodus 2), Moses spent the next forty years as a shepherd in the land of Midian. That was Moses' "prison." He probably thought he would spend the rest of his life there – until God appeared to him in the burning bush and commissioned him to go back to Egypt to rescue the people of Israel from their slavery there. During those forty years in the wilderness, even though Moses may not have been aware of it, God was at work, preparing him for the great mission of his life as the liberator of his people.

If two years seems like a long time to wait – and it does – think about the forty years Moses spent in the wilderness of God's waiting room. In all that time, God did not forget him. God used that time to refine and shape him.

Nobel Prize-winning author Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn spent eight years in a Soviet prison camp. He wrote about it in his book *The Gulag Archipelago*. He describes how God came near to him and opened the eyes of his heart: "In the intoxication of youthful successes I had felt myself to be infallible, and I was therefore cruel. In the surfeit of power I was a murderer, and an oppressor. In my most evil moments I was convinced that I was doing good, and I was well supplied with systematic arguments. And it was only when I lay there on rotting prison straw that I sensed within myself the first stirrings of good. Gradually, it was disclosed to me (by God) that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, not between classes, not between political parties either – but right through every human heart – and through all human hearts. So, bless you, prison, for having been in my life."

Isn't that a remarkable thing to say? "Bless you, prison, for having been in my life." Joseph would be able to say that, too, for the time would come when he could see that God was using his prison experience to prepare the way and to prepare him for leadership in the land of Egypt.

There is a new movie out this weekend called *The Informant!* starring Matt Damon. (I haven't seen it, and just because I mention it here doesn't mean that I'm necessarily recommending it to you.) The movie tells the story of Mark Whitacre, an Ivy League Ph. D. (Cornell) and rising star at Archer Daniels Midland, one of the largest conglomerates in America. At 32, he was named president of ADM's Bioproducts Division, the youngest divisional president in the history of the company. He became the highest-level corporate executive ever to turn whistleblower in U. S. history. When ADM found out that he was acting as an informant for the FBI in an investigation of price-fixing by the company, ADM accused Whitacre of embezzling millions of dollars from the company – which was true. He went to prison for it in 1998, and spent the next eight years there. The movie doesn't include this part of the story, but God used Whitacre's prison experience to change his life. In a recent interview with Marvin Olasky in *World* magazine (some of you may have seen it), Whitacre tells what happened to him:

"(In prison) I started thinking, 'How am I ever going to get through (this)?' I did not want to live. I did not want to put my family through it. I tried to kill myself.

“I was being transferred through this Atlanta holdover that was 23-hours a day lockdown. They put your meals through the door, that type of thing, three times a day.... Everyone was let out for an hour a day in what I called a dog cage, this crowded fenced-in area.

“(Others) took the hour break. I did not. I was reading the Bible, reading in Psalms, and that’s when I started really relying on God, as compared to going to church on Sunday and saying I’m a Christian. I got on my knees and said, ‘God, for someone in prison for almost a decade, the divorce rate is over 99 percent. They don’t survive as a family six months in prison, let alone a decade. Would I even have any employment after nine years in prison, a convicted felon?’

“That’s when I decided that I could not handle it on my own. That’s when I began relying on God. After I did that there was so much peace and contentment that came in my life. Our whole family started getting better. Prior to that I was getting bitter. The only difference between those two words is the letter ‘I.’”

He goes on to say: “We not only survived, we thrived. Our marriage relationship grew. Our children got stronger. All of those things I worried about... (God took care of.)”

Mark Whitacre didn’t want to go to prison. He did everything he could to stay out of prison. But it was in prison that his faith in Christ became real. It was in prison, deprived of everything in life he valued, that he discovered what has true eternal value. It was in prison that he found peace. If we were to ask him today, I’m sure Mark Whitacre would say: “Bless you, prison, for having been in my life.”

Whatever your prison(s) may be, I pray the day will come when you will see God’s purpose in your prison experience, and you will be able to say: “Bless you, prison, for having been in my life.” I don’t know when – or if – that day will come this side of heaven, but I pray that it will.

While Joseph was still in prison, Pharaoh had a dream. Two dreams, in fact. And he was upset because he didn’t know what the dreams meant. All his wise men and magicians were stumped, too. But then, at a most providential moment, the cupbearer remembered Joseph. Do you think that was just a coincidence? Not on your life! It was God who gave Pharaoh the dreams. It was God who brought Joseph to the mind of the cupbearer and prompted him to speak up. It was God, as Joseph was quick to point out, who had the power to interpret dreams and make their meaning known.

Pharaoh’s dreams were a turning point in the fortunes of Joseph. In a single day he went from the prison to the palace and became, in the sovereign plan of God, the most powerful man in Egypt (second only to Pharaoh himself) and the architect of a plan that would save thousands of lives in the years of famine to come.

Pharaoh’s dreams are really not hard to decipher (especially if you already know what they mean, as we do). As Joseph explained, God was revealing to Pharaoh what He (God) was about to do. Egypt would experience seven years of great abundance, which would then be

followed by seven years of extreme famine. Seven “fat” years to be followed by seven “lean” years.

In the musical *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* there is a song in which Joseph explains the dreams to Pharaoh this way:

Seven years of bumper crops are on their way
 Years of plenty, endless wheat and tons of hay
 Your farms will boom, there won't be room
 To store the surplus of food you grow
 After that, the future doesn't look so bright
 Egypt's luck will change completely overnight
 And famine's hand will stalk the land
 With food an all-time low
 Noble king, there is no doubt
 What your dreams are all about
 All these things you saw in your pajamas
 Are a long-range forecast for your farmers

Pharaoh was king of Egypt. But God was – and is – the Lord. He is the One who causes the sun to shine and the rain to fall. As we see in the life of Joseph and in the economy of Egypt, God is never at a loss to bring about what He desires (James Boice).

Joseph, as he had done when the cupbearer and the baker came to him with their dreams, was careful with Pharaoh not to take the credit. In verse 15, Pharaoh said: “I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it.”

What did Joseph say in response? “I cannot do it, but God can. I don't have the answers, but God does” (41:16). Joseph recognized that he was just the messenger God had chosen to use. The dreams came from God. The interpretation came from God. The glory belongs to God. Joseph was just a servant God could use. He understood that.

Joseph wasn't lobbying to become prime minister of Egypt or for any other position in Pharaoh's administration. That was not his ambition in life. He was just doing what God had called and gifted him to do. God took care of the rest. And Joseph ended up in charge of the whole land of Egypt.

In a period of 13 years, Joseph had come a long way from being sold into slavery by his brothers and taken to Egypt at the age of 17. Genesis 41:46 says that Joseph was only 30 years old when he began to govern Egypt on behalf of Pharaoh. Still a young man. A very young man. But God used all of his experiences, all of his setbacks, all of his time in prison, to shape and refine his character so that when the time came, Joseph would be ready to lead.

During his prison experience, in those years of waiting when he was forgotten – but not forgotten by God – Joseph experienced the peace of God that can keep a person going even when life is harder than you ever imagined and you don't know what God is doing.

In his *Insight for Today* online devotional for yesterday, Chuck Swindoll wrote that peace is the ability to wait patiently in spite of panic (or fear) brought on by uncertainty. Joseph exhibited that king of peace.

Do you know that peace in your life? If not, ask God for it. Ask Him to give you His peace. This is God's promise in Isaiah 26:3-4:

You (The LORD) will keep in perfect peace
the one whose mind is stayed on You,
because he trusts in You.
Trust in the LORD forever,
for the LORD is an everlasting rock.

In years of abundance or years of famine, in the prison experiences and all the experiences of life, may you know the blessing of God's peace.

Lord, let it be so . Amen.