

Genesis 39-41

When we last saw Joseph, he had become a household slave of Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's guards. The next three chapters are a continuous story and so we will read them together.

In Chapter 39 Potiphar sees that "the Lord was with Joseph" and so quickly makes Joseph his chief servant and puts this Hebrew in charge not only of the household but of everything in it. The only concern Potiphar has is his own food, which he maintains because of ritual cleanliness. Under Joseph's leadership the house prospers, and all is well. Well almost everything is well. The great problem is that Joseph is not only blessed by the Lord in his oversight of the household, but that he is "handsome and good looking." Anyone who has ever watched a soap opera knows what is coming next. Potiphar's wife takes a shine to Joseph and wants him to sleep with her. Joseph continues to refuse her advances, which leads to her lying about him and charging him with sexual advances. Potiphar is furious and as the chapter ends, Joseph is thrown into prison. Not to worry, however, the Lord is with Joseph and he is soon running the prison.

Chapter 40 begins with Joseph getting some company in the prison. Pharaoh's Cup-Bearer and baker have displeased their boss and so are thrown into prison. Joseph, of course, is placed in charge of these men. Then something happens, which draws us back to our introduction to Joseph, and that is dreams. Both the Cup-Bearer and baker have dreams. Both are troubled by their dreams and Joseph asks why they seem so down. At first only the Cup-Bearer recounts his dream. Joseph listens and tells him that Pharaoh will release him from prison and he will go back to be the Cup-Bearer. All that Joseph asks in return for his services is that the Cup-Bearer ask Pharaoh to release Joseph. The baker, excited by the interpretation tells Joseph his dream. Unfortunately, the interpretation is not positive, and Joseph tells him he will lose his head, literally. On Pharaoh's birthday, Joseph's interpretations prove true, but the Cup-Bearer quickly forgets about Joseph and so our hero remains in prison.

Chapter 41 begins two years later with Pharaoh having a dream that he cannot understand and no one in his stable of wise men can interpret. It is in that moment that the forgetful Cup-Bearer remembers Joseph, who is immediately brought to Pharaoh and the dream is retold. Joseph listens and tells the Pharaoh that the dream means that Egypt will have seven years of plenty and then seven years of famine. Joseph doesn't stop there however but offers a comprehensive plan for dealing with the impending famine. Pharaoh is so impressed that he both adopts the plan and puts Joseph in charge of implementing it.

Reflections: The Joseph stories, unlike the rest of Genesis, tend to be formulaic, with characters who are two, rather than three dimensional. Joseph is good looking, brilliant and always comes out on top. Those around him immediately recognize these attributes and place him in charge of everything. Even so, the writer uses these simplistic characters to make a complex point, and that is that the God of Joseph (who has protected him and helped him interpret these dreams) is greater than Pharaoh (who thinks he is a god). This is a clear reminder to the readers (who themselves may be in captivity) that the God of Joseph can raise up God's people and bring down those who oppress them.

Questions

1. Have you ever been faced with a moral dilemma and suffered for making the right choice? How was that for you?
2. Have you ever experienced God intervening on your behalf. What was that like if you did?
3. Have you ever done something nice for someone and gotten nothing in return? How did you deal with this in your mind?