

Genesis 40 — What should I do when suffering doesn't end?

October 2, 2016

Good morning CrossWinds! We are a church that is thankful for church growth. This week Pastor Jordan and Krystal from the Spencer campus did their part when when Krystal gave birth to their second child. Her name is Mara Evangeline. She was born at 3:45 p.m. on Wednesday. Everyone is doing well, except for Silas. He is a little jealous that he doesn't have all of mom's attention.

This morning we continue our study in the book of Genesis. We are in Genesis 40 where we continue our study in the life of Joseph. When we first met him, Joseph was a bratty, spoiled kid at the age of 17. He tattled on his adult brothers. He tried to get out of work. He was filled with pride because he had a special jacket. His brothers hated him so much they sold him into slavery. When your brothers sell you into slavery, that is not a healthy family. He was bought off the slave block in Egypt by a man named Potiphar. He was head of the secret service in Egypt. Over 11 years Joseph went from an entry-level slave to serving as head of Pharaoh's house. Last week, we saw Potiphar's wife was the original desperate housewife when she tried repeatedly and forcibly to seduce Joseph. Joseph resisted her and literally ran from her as she was tearing off his clothes. That is a forceful woman! Out of frustration she trumped up false charges of rape against him. Joseph found himself in prison for a crime he didn't commit. That is where we pick up the story.

Genesis 37 was about Joseph's juvenile pride and the hatred of his brothers. Genesis 39 was about Mrs. Potiphar, the seductress. What new

hardship did Joseph face in Genesis 40? There is no new hardship in this chapter. Joseph stayed stuck in jail for a crime he didn't commit. It is a chapter about the same suffering that continued to go on and on without end. This is something all of us can relate to. We know what it is like to almost get a job, but the phone call never comes and we are stuck in unemployment. Many of you know what it is like to be stuck single wishing you were married. You meet someone where you have high hopes for a future together but you watch it cool and disintegrate in front of our eyes. You are left suffering loneliness that never seems to end. Others of us know what it is like to suffer never-ending physical ailments. You are in the hospital and you take three steps forward in healing but an unexpected infection leads you two steps back. The suffering never seems to end.

The events begin a process that will ultimately set Joseph free and elevate him to second in command over Egypt but when the chapter ends Joseph finds himself in the exact same place he started. He was asking the same question many of us do. Why would a loving God leave me stuck in suffering when he could so easily answer my prayer and solve it? That is the question we will answer this morning. Let's dive into the text.

Some time after this, the cupbearer of the king of Egypt and his baker committed an offense against their lord the king of Egypt. And Pharaoh was angry with his two officers, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker, and he put them in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, in the prison where Joseph was confined. The captain of the guard appointed Joseph to be with them, and he attended them. They continued for some time in custody. Genesis 40:1–4 (ESV)

We don't know how long Joseph spent in prison before this happened. The text says it was a long time before these scenes unfolded. The natural inclination in this kind of situation is to feel forgotten by God, to feel lost.

It was when he felt forgotten by God that two high-profile prisoners were sent to the prison where Joseph was confined. The first was the cup bearer. This guy did a lot more than pour the wine into Pharaoh's cup. His job was to ensure the quality and purity of the wine Pharaoh drank. He oversaw the winemaking process from grape to cup. Before Pharaoh drank from a cup of wine, the cup-bearer drank from it himself. If there was poison in the drink, the cup-bearer died instead of Pharaoh. The cup bearer was an extremely important position because Pharaoh trusted his life in your hands. Death by poisoning was a favorite method of political assassination and the one protecting your cup was the cup bearer. This means the cup bearer was an extremely trustworthy and loyal man. In the Old Testament book of Nehemiah we find Nehemiah was a cup bearer for the king of Persia. You trusted the cup bearer with your life. The Pharaoh usually consulted with his cup bearer before he made important political decisions. If could trust the cup bearer with you life, you could also trust him for good counsel on the kingdom.

The second high-profile prisoner was the chief baker. This guy was responsible for the king's cupcakes. He was actually responsible for more than cupcakes. Ancient hieroglyphics tell us the Egyptians baked 37 kinds of cakes and 57 varieties of bread. This guy was in charge of the king's carbohydrates. He wasn't just in charge of baking cakes, but like the cup bearer, it was his job to

ensure the purity and quality of the king's carbohydrates. He was also to guard the Pharaoh's food from poisoning.

Apparently, Pharaoh enjoyed a meal that involved bread and wine but ended up sick after the meal. There was suspicion of poisoning. The poisoning either came from the bread he ate or the wine he drank. Since nobody knew which one it was, both the cup bearer and the baker were thrown into prison while the criminal investigation was underway.

Who was the Captain of the Guard? That was Potiphar. We met him last week. As head of the secret service, he was in charge of a special prison where the king's prisoners' were confined. That is the prison where Joseph was sent when he was falsely accused. Before prison, Joseph worked in Potiphar's house, now in prison Joseph works for Potiphar as a prisoner.

This prison was not comfortable like a modern prison. It didn't have cable TV and an exercise room. Psalm 105:18-19 tell us Joseph had a collar of iron around his neck and his feet. Apparently he had enough freedom and trust in prison that he was allowed to serve the other prisoners. This prison is sometimes called the dungeon or the pit. It is the same word used to describe the pit his brothers threw him into in chapter 37. This means it was underground. Most likely Joseph did not see the light of day for years in this dungeon.

At the time, Joseph didn't realize this was all part of God's plan. God put Joseph in Potiphar's house so Potiphar, who worked directly for Pharaoh, could see Joseph work for 11 years in the good times then see him work for more than two years in prison when he was falsely accused. In addition, the cup bearer,

who was also a direct employee of Pharaoh would also see Joseph's gifts and character. At the right time there would be multiple people who worked directly for Pharaoh vouching for Joseph's character and life. God was lining up the pieces.

Joseph didn't know that yet. The story continues:

And one night they both dreamed—the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt, who were confined in the prison—each his own dream, and each dream with its own interpretation. When Joseph came to them in the morning, he saw that they were troubled. So he asked Pharaoh's officers who were with him in custody in his master's house, "Why are your faces downcast today?" They said to him, "We have had dreams, and there is no one to interpret them." And Joseph said to them, "Do not interpretations belong to God? Please tell them to me." Genesis 40:5–8 (ESV)

When enduring lasting suffering, don't stop caring about others. If anybody had a reason to feel sorry for themselves, it was Joseph. If anyone had reason for a pity party, Joseph had every right to throw one. The first temptation everyone faces when enduring suffering that doesn't end is to let our suffering turn us in on ourselves. We stop caring for other people when we are consumed with our own problems.

You know this has happened in your life when someone tells you about suffering they are enduring and you immediately jump in with your own story and take over the conversation. Suffering has turned yourself in on yourself. You aren't interested in empathizing and caring about the suffering of others. All you care about is talking about yourself.

Joseph was taking the time to care for these prisoners when he had enough problems of his own. Our own frustrating experiences either turn us in on ourselves and make us bitter and selfish people, or through the Holy Spirit

our own sufferings can make us more empathetic and caring about others because we understand suffering on a personal basis.

As a 17-year-old boy with his brothers, Joseph was insensitive and arrogant. As a 28-year-old man who has suffered innocently and severely, he was filled with compassion toward others.

When enduring lasting suffering, don't lose faith in God. It is easy to see why this would happen. If God isn't answering my prayer, why pray? If I don't deserve any of this because I was falsely accused and God hasn't come to my rescue, why trust him? In spite of undeserved and what felt like purposeless suffering, Joseph had not given up on God.

When it came time to interpret the dreams of these men, he boldly told them God would provide interpretations. God gave Joseph dreams of his family bowing down to him over 11 years before, but they hadn't come true. Joseph hung on to God and his faith even when he didn't understand what God was doing.

When we face suffering that doesn't make sense, like Joseph, hold on to God. Don't walk away from God.

So the chief cupbearer told his dream to Joseph and said to him, "In my dream there was a vine before me, and on the vine there were three branches. As soon as it budded, its blossoms shot forth, and the clusters ripened into grapes. Pharaoh's cup was in my hand, and I took the grapes and pressed them into Pharaoh's cup and placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand." Then Joseph said to him, "This is its interpretation: the three branches are three days. In three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your office, and you shall place Pharaoh's cup in his hand as formerly, when you were his cupbearer. Only remember me, when it is well with you, and please do me the kindness to mention me to Pharaoh, and so get me out of this house. For I was indeed stolen out of the land of the Hebrews, and here also I have done nothing that they should put me into the pit." Genesis 40:9–15 (ESV)

The chief cupbearer goes first and he told his dream to Joseph. In his dream there were three branches on a vine that budded and produced grapes. In his dream the cup bearer took the grapes, pressed them and put them into Pharaoh's cup. This was a straight forward interpretation. Joseph said in three days you will resume putting Pharaoh's cup in his hand. Pharaoh will lift up your head. That is an idiom for giving you a royal pardon.

Now we hit the center of the story. Joseph said, when you are restored, remember me. Show me kindness and mention me to Pharaoh. I didn't do anything to deserve to be in this prison. I am suffering unfairly and it doesn't seem to end.

The word for kindness in these verses is a special word. It is the word *hesed* in Hebrew. It means loving your neighbor not just with words and emotions but with action and service. In Micah 6:8 it says we are to do justice, to love *hesed*, and walk humbly with our God. As Christians, we are to do justice and not just show love to others with our words or our feelings but to actually do something about it as we walk humbly with our God.

The best use of *hesed* is to describe the way God loves us. The Bible says he has entered into a covenant relationship with his children. God bound himself to us to act lovingly and faithfully toward us. God bound himself toward us to always love us and to be faithful to us with his loving actions. Even when we sin against God and have been completely unfaithful to him, we can appeal to God's commitment to love us, his *hesed*.

When Jerusalem was destroyed and the world was falling apart around God's people, they took comfort in God's steadfast love. His *hesed* love.

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. Lamentations 3:22–23 (ESV)

Joseph's request to the cup bearer is that he would remember him to Pharaoh. He said, "I interpreted your dream; I was faithful to you to take care of you in prison and God gave me the ability to interpret your dream. As I was faithful to you in loving actions, you be faithful to me and get me out of this prison when you get back to Pharaoh. Show me steadfast love that is actions, not just words. Show me *hesed*." In a moment we will find out if the cup bearer was faithful.

When the chief baker saw that the interpretation was favorable, he said to Joseph, "I also had a dream: there were three cake baskets on my head, and in the uppermost basket there were all sorts of baked food for Pharaoh, but the birds were eating it out of the basket on my head." And Joseph answered and said, "This is its interpretation: the three baskets are three days. In three days Pharaoh will lift up your head—from you!—and hang you on a tree. And the birds will eat the flesh from you." Genesis 40:16–19 (ESV)

He said that in his dream, where he had three baskets of pastries stacked on top of his head and the birds are eating his baked goodies, that means that he didn't protect Pharaoh's food. In three days his head would also be lifted up. While the cup bearer's head would be lifted up so his position was restored, his head would be lifted right off his shoulders. He would be hung. He was guilty of not protecting Pharaoh's food. Apparently he was involved in the attempt to poison Pharaoh, and he paid for it with his life.

On the third day, which was Pharaoh's birthday, he made a feast for all his servants and lifted up the head of the chief cupbearer and the head of the chief

baker among his servants. He restored the chief cupbearer to his position, and he placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand. But he hanged the chief baker, as Joseph had interpreted to them. Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him. Genesis 40:20–23 (ESV)

Three days later Pharaoh had his birthday party. In his party he restored the cup bearer to service but he hung the baker and stuck his body on a stick to be eaten by the birds of the air.

Some people notice this is the only place in the Bible that mentions a birthday party. In the party, somebody died. Some people try to say we shouldn't have birthday parties because the Bible doesn't have anything positive to say about this one. Personally, I disagree. Throw a great birthday party for those you love. Make sure people feel loved and treasured. Just make sure as part of the party you don't kill anyone.

Put yourself in Joseph's position. The God-given interpretations of these men's dreams turned out exactly as he said. I am sure Joseph was confident that the cup bearer — a man considered one of the most trustworthy men in Pharaoh's kingdom — would quickly tell Pharaoh of Joseph's unfair situation. It would only be a matter of hours until Pharaoh and the cup bearer released Joseph from jail.

The problem is those hours turned into days. Those days turned into weeks. Those weeks turned into months. The months into years and nobody came knocking on the prison door. After all the practical care and dream interpretation Joseph did for the cup-bearer, this most trustworthy man did not mention Joseph's name to Pharaoh? The cup-bearer forgot him. He didn't

remember Joseph. He didn't show him *hesed* love. This is the first point to remember from this chapter.

People may not show steadfast love toward us, but God always will.

When everyone else turns their back on you, when one of the most trustworthy men in the nation forgets about you for two years, rest assured, God has not forgotten you. He has not forgotten about your suffering that seems to go on and on. God is more faithful than the cup bearer.

One of my favorite Psalms is Psalm 136. This Psalm drills into our heads that God is not like the cup bearer, as the Psalmist talks about God's faithfulness again and again for 26 verses.

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever. Give thanks to the God of gods, for his steadfast love endures forever. Give thanks to the Lord of lords, for his steadfast love endures forever; to him who alone does great wonders, for his steadfast love endures forever... Psalm 136:1–4 (ESV)

It is he who remembered us in our low estate, for his steadfast love endures forever; and rescued us from our foes, for his steadfast love endures forever... Psalm 136:23–24 (ESV)

God allows the right amount of suffering to mature our faith and shape our character for the work he calls us to do.

Maybe you are there. This morning, can you relate to Joseph? Are you stuck in a period of long-term suffering that won't end? Are you struggling to understand why God hasn't released you? Have the people you asked for help from let you down? Does none of your long-term suffering make sense? What doesn't make sense to us right now makes sense to God, whose wisdom, love and care for us is infinitely greater than we can imagine.

The Bible tells us God uses extended times of suffering in our lives to mold our character and to prepare us for our God-assigned missions in life.

Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. Romans 5:3–5 (ESV)

We don't get character by reading a book. We get character by enduring difficult times and learning to trust in God during those difficult times.

For Joseph, this extended time in the dungeon that he didn't deserve was preparing him. His suffering transformed him from a 17-year-old selfish brat to a mature man who knew how to handle people close to him from turning against him, because he experienced it with his brothers. He knew how to handle sexual temptation. When he became second-in-command over all of Egypt there would be many Mrs. Potiphar's seeking to gain power by seducing him. He would also know how to forgive those that worked for him that disappointed him, because he lived it with the cup bearer.

If Joseph escaped all his sufferings, he wouldn't have learned those lessons and had the Holy Spirit mature his character.

None of us like suffering, especially suffering that never seems to end. Many times, when we look back on our lives, we see how God taught us to trust him and matured us through those hard times. The lessons he taught us couldn't be learned in five minutes, it takes long-term suffering to change deep-seated issues in our lives. It is after he releases us from suffering and we look back on our lives that we can see the wisdom of his ways.

Conclusion

This morning, as you look at the cup bearer and the baker, which one do you find yourself identifying with? Each one of us is the baker. Just like the baker, we sinned against our master. The Bible says that we all deserve to die.

Here is the good news. God loves us. He sent his son to die in our places for our sin so that when Jesus comes into his kingdom, we won't die like the baker but he will lift us up like the cup bearer. Even though the cup bearer forgot Joseph, Jesus will not forget you and me.

Not only do we know Jesus will remember us and take us out of our trials when he deems best and he will remember us when he comes into his kingdom but as a response, he asks us to remember him regularly through the Lord's Supper. As we close our service, we are going to celebrate communion. As we remember how Jesus' suffering looked so purposeful when it was carried out but when we look back on it we see how God used Christ's death to save us from our sin. In the same way, our long-term suffering may look purposeful today but someday we can rest assured we will look back on our suffering and see God's purpose in all of it and declare he is good.



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