

Title: From Pit Cistern to Pharaoh's Court

Text: Genesis 37–41

6/28/26

Introduction: In one of my favorite scenes in literary fiction, two of the main characters are trudging through the most dark and difficult places of the story, and they pause for a moment to reflect on their quest. What will be the outcome, and will anyone remember their deeds in song or story? They start to imagine happy endings, and what it may be like to hear their story told one day by the fireside. Then, remembering the hopelessness of their present circumstances, one character says to the other, “We’re going on a bit too fast. You and I, Sam, are still stuck in the worst places of the story.”

Maybe that’s how you feel about your life this morning. You’d like to think there’s a happy ending, but the path forward looks dark and difficult. Some days, you wonder if you will win through to the other side. You’re trying to hold fast to the promises of God, and you often find yourself wondering, “Where is God in it all?”

For the person in the Bible we’ll consider this morning, his life was stuck in the worst places of the story, yet from our perspective we can see the good hand of God in all his circumstances. Turn in your Bible to Gen 37.

Context within Genesis: The reoccurring phrase “these are the generations of” (הלְדוֹת formulas) structures the book of Genesis (e.g., 2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 11:27; et. al). In each of the major sections, this formula introduces the heritage of the progenitor heading each unit. Each unit traces the offspring of the patriarch named. For example, the first major unit follows the lineage of “the generations of the heavens and the earth” (2:4). Likewise, “The generations of Terah” (11:27) traces Terah’s lineage through Abram whom God calls to be his agent of worldwide blessing.

Near Context: Our passage this morning follows the lineage of Jacob, Abraham’s grandson. “These are the generations of Jacob” (37:2). This passage tells God’s people how Abraham’s family came to sojourn in the land of Egypt. God had promised them Canaan for their dwelling, and since the time of Abraham they had sojourned in Canaan. God had also told Abraham that his descendants would leave Canaan to sojourn for 400 years in another land where they would multiply and prosper, even under oppression, and that God would later bring them back to the Promised Land (15:13–14). The Joseph story explains how these things came to pass.

Summary: Since this sermon considers such a large portion of Scripture (Gen 37–41), I am working on the assumption that you are familiar—perhaps very familiar—with the Joseph story. If that’s not the case, then I apologize, and I will do my best to keep everyone on the same page. Along the way we will read select portions of Gen 37–41. This passage has a palpable downward trajectory. Joseph goes into a pit cistern (37:24); he does “down to Egypt” as a slave (37:25, 28); and he’s thrown into the pit of prison (39:20; 40:15, “pit”). Of course, this all happens before a dramatic reversal of fortune, which comes at the end.

1. Down Into the Pit (Read 37:1–11, 18–20.)

Jacob—deceiver and dreamer—suffered from chronic favoritism. Jacob strongly favored Joseph (37:3), so Joseph’s brothers were extremely hostile toward Joseph. They couldn’t even speak peaceably with him.

Joseph, at 17 years of age, dreams two dreams. In the first his brothers’ sheaves bow down to his sheaf (37:5–8), and in the second the sun, moon, and eleven stars bow down to him (37:9–11). Obviously, these dreams intensify his brothers’ jealousy and hatred. (Dreams play a prominent role in the Joseph story, and they consistently reveal God’s purposes and plans [cf. 41:25]. We also learn later that the doubling of the dream assures its certain fulfillment [cf. 41:32].)

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Joseph's brothers plot to kill him on account of his dreams, and their sarcastic intent is to prevent the fulfillment of Joseph's dreams (37:19–20). This is a master stroke of irony because the brothers themselves set the fulfillment of Joseph's dreams in motion. Reuben tries to rescue Joseph, and Judah hatches a plot to sell Joseph into slavery. Joseph is stripped of his coat and taken down into Egypt where he enters the service of Potiphar, an Egyptian official.

JANUS: The Judah and Tamar Scene (chapter 39)

Reflection:

- There will come times in your life when God will take you places where you don't want to go through unavoidable circumstances, and he will give you exactly what you need to endure those moments (cf. the dreams of 37:5–11).

2. Down Into Potiphar's House (Read Gen 39:1–13, 19–20.)

The LORD was with Joseph, and the LORD prospered Joseph (39:1, "The LORD was with Joseph;" 39:3, "The LORD was with him;" "The LORD caused all that he did to succeed in his hands;" 39:5, "The LORD blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake").

Joseph becomes chief overseer of a prominent household (39:6). Remember, he was 17 when he was sold into slavery.

Potiphar's wife tries repeatedly to seduce Joseph, but Joseph absolutely refuses to yield to temptation. She relentlessly baggers him, and he won't even consent to be with her (39:10, "And as she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not listen to her, to lie beside her or to be with her."). The passage indicates that Joseph will give no place to the temptation of this woman in his heart and mind. Notice, he refuses to sin against his neighbor and to commit this great act of wickedness against God (39:9).

As Joseph was ambushed by his brothers in chapter 37, he's ambushed by this temptress in chapter 39. His brothers stripped him of his colorful coat; Potiphar's wife strips him of his outer garment as he flees and completely removes himself from the house (39:12).

Joseph's reward for loving God with all of his heart and loving his neighbor as himself is a further decent into the pit of prison (39:20; cf. 40:15).

Reflection:

- When God takes you where you do not want to go through unavoidable circumstances, he will go with you. He will unfailingly bless and prosper his purposes through your life.
- What are your marching orders whenever things go sideways in your life and you enter dark and difficult times. What should you do? Of course, you know the answer. Trust and obey God. The rules of engagement don't change whenever we find ourselves in unpleasant circumstances.
- Realize that obedience to God's commands may actually make your immediate situation worse, but God calls you to live a life of faith.
- You will never find yourself outside of God's providence (cf. 39:20, "prison, the place where the king'd prisoners were confined")

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3. Down Into Prison (Read 39:21–40:8, 20–23.)

Once again, the LORD was with Joseph and blessed all the works of his hands (39:21, “But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison.” 39:23, “The LORD was with him. And whatever he did, the LORD made it succeed.”).

In God's providence, Joseph was put in charge of Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker “in the house of the captain of the guard” (40:3).

Here, we encounter two more dreams one on the part of the cupbearer and one given to the baker. Joseph knows that mysteries belong to God, so he asks Pharaoh's officials to share their dreams with him (40:8). Then Joseph interprets each man's dream. The cupbearer's head will be lifted up in vindication, and the baker's head will be lifted up in execution. Joseph pleads with the cupbearer to mention his situation to Pharaoh, but tragically the cupbearer forgets (40:14–15, 23).

Reflection:

- When your circumstance go from bad to worse, God will continue to prosper his purposes in and through your life. Clearly, Joseph was gaining administrative knowledge and experience that would outfit him for what God ultimately wanted him to do. Furthermore, God had Joseph exactly where he wanted him when he wanted him to be there.
- God will use your previous experience in your current assignment.

4. Up Into Pharaoh's Court (Read 41:1–14b, 37–41, 57.)

“After two whole years Pharaoh dreamed...” (41:1). For the third time in the Joseph story, we encounter two dreams. The dreams signify seven years of abundant prosperity followed by seven years of famine. Finally, the cupbearer remembers Joseph (41:9–13).

The story emphasizes that only God reveals knowledge and mysteries (41:16, “It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer.” 41:25, “God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do;” 41:28, “God has shown Pharaoh what he is about to do;” 41:39, “Since God has shown you all this”).

As long last Joseph is re-robed (41:42) and exalted to rulership in the land of Egypt, and through Joseph God brings worldwide blessing (41:57).

Reflection:

- God is never late (41:1, “After two whole years”).
- God will exonerate you in due time.
- God will bring worldwide blessing through the offspring of the woman, through the seed of Abraham (41:57).

Conclusion: Ultimately, 1 Peter 5:6 summarizes the message of these chapters in Genesis: “Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you.” Of course, this is exactly the way that Jesus lived his life.