

**“LIVING IN THE TENSION OF THE UNKNOWN”**  
**(Genesis 40:1-23)**

This morning I want to begin with a question to get the wheels of your minds turning. The question is this: If God offered to reveal to you everything about your future, would you want to know? God, of course, has told us many things in His Word as to what our ultimate future holds, but would you want to know the specific details of your life... Would you want to know how long you're going to live? Would you want to know the joys and sorrow you will experience? Would you want to know the same things about your wife or husband or children or parents?

On one hand, you might think, “Knowing my future would make life much easier – if I knew ahead of time whether or not a relationship would work out, whether or not I would get a job, or what health problem I would face – I could be prepared and not waste a lot of time or energy on something that’s not going to happen.”

On the other hand, you might think, “Do I really want to know? If I knew something bad was going to happen, wouldn’t that be depressing? Wouldn’t knowing everything ahead of time kind of take the adventure and excitement out of living?”

The reality is that God has so designed life that we walk not by sight, but by faith. There are going to be plenty of circumstances in life we can’t figure out, and questions we ask that will not be answered. Walking by faith is fun and exciting when things are going well, but it’s not so fun when life is not going well. It’s during the hard times of life that we want clarity and certainty, but what God wants is trust. Jesus said, “Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own” (Matthew 6:34). Living in the tension of the unknown presses us to trust God as we step forward in faith.

Every character in the Bible walked by faith, and few model what it means to walk by faith better than Joseph. Joseph wasn’t completely in the dark as to his future. He knew through a set of dreams God gave him when he was 17 that he would one day be in a position of prominence and that his father and mother and eleven brothers would bow down to them. That’s all that Joseph knew for sure. What he didn’t know is how all this would come about – he didn’t know the timing or the circumstances or the road he’d take to get there.

We know, of course, how Joseph’s story ends and how he ascends to being second-in-command over all of Egypt, and saving his family from extinction. We also know that in the larger story of the Bible, God used Joseph as a key figure in His plan to save the world through Jesus. God choose for Jesus to come through Joseph’s family, and if his family does not survive, there is no Jesus and there is no salvation. Joseph knew that God had a special plan for his life, but he didn’t know how that plan would unfold. If he knew all the pain and trauma and heartache it would involve, he’d probably say, “Here I am Lord, send someone else.”

Our story is similar to Joseph's story in that none of us knows how our life is going to turn out. We know several things – we know that when this life is over, we'll live forever in heaven with God – we know that one day Christ will return to earth and make all things right – and we also know that until Jesus comes, God has a purpose and plan for each of our lives. What we don't know – like Joseph – are the daily details of how God's plan for our life will unfold.

This brings us today to chapter 40 of Genesis, and in this great chapter we find modeled by Joseph some key qualities that bolster us as we live in the tension of the unknown. Before we dig into this chapter and look at those qualities, it's helpful to review Joseph's story up to this point.

Joseph, as you'll recall, was betrayed by his brothers and sold into slavery at age 17. He ends up in Egypt in the house of a highly-placed officer named Potiphar. Potiphar quickly recognizes Joseph's character and management skills, and puts him in charge of all of his affairs. Just when things are starting to look up for Joseph, he is falsely accused by Potiphar's wife of making sexual advances and Joseph is promptly thrown into prison.

It seems like every time Joseph does something right, things turn out wrong. He obeys his father and goes out to check on his brothers, only to be thrown in a pit by his jealous brothers and sold to a caravan of slave traders. Then he faithfully serves Potiphar and resists the advances of his wife, only to be rewarded by being thrown into jail. It reminds me of a book written James Dobson called *When God Doesn't Make Sense*. How do you make sense of bad things happening when you're faithfully serving the Lord? Doesn't doing the right thing mean that things will turn out well?

The principle we learn over and over in Joseph's story is that you have to let the story of your life play out. In the middle of every good story it always feels like all hope is lost. That's why you keep watching to the end of the movie. If you take a snapshot of your life at any given moment, it may seem like there's no evidence that God is in the picture. It's only by looking back that you can see God's presence in the moments where it seems like its absent. The story of Joseph teaches us not to judge our lives on one moment or one season of life – it teaches us when we're trying to figure out what God is up to, that it takes a long time and a lot of faithfulness.

At the end of chapter 39 we read... “But while Joseph was there in the prison, the Lord was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden. So the warden put Joseph in charge of all those held in the prison, and he was made responsible for all that was done there. The warden paid no attention to anything under Joseph's care, because the Lord was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did” (39:20b-23).

The most repeated promise in the Bible is: God is with you. If you belong to God through faith in Christ, God promises to be with wherever you go and whatever you go through. God was with Joseph when he was thrown in a pit, He was with Joseph when he served as a slave in Potiphar's house, and He is with Joseph as he's in prison. And we read that God is working behind the scenes, in a way that Joseph cannot see, to bring out his ultimate exaltation.

Just as Joseph caught the eye of Potiphar and was put in charge of his house, Joseph now catches the eye of the prison warden and is put in charge of the other prisoners. No matter where Joseph was placed, he rose to the top and was successful – and though he didn't realize it at the time, his promotion in jail was part of God's plan.

In 40:1-4a we read... “Some time later, the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt offended their master, the king of Egypt. Pharaoh was angry with his two officials, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker, and put them in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, in the same prison where Joseph was confined. The captain of the guard assigned them to Joseph, and he attended them.”

Into Joseph's life walks two men – the cupbearer and the baker of King Pharaoh. A cupbearer was a high-ranking official in charge of serving the king. The KJV refers to him as a “butler.” The primary responsibility of a cupbearer or butler was to guard what the king drank and to taste the drink before giving it to him to make sure it had not been poisoned. In a list of high stress jobs, this one is near the top. The flipside is that he had the trust and confidence of the king, and gave him access to power.

Where the cupbearer was in charge of the king's drink, the baker was in charge of the king's food. He not only prepared the king's food, but he tasted the food to make sure no one put arsenic in it. As it so happened, the cupbearer and baker both found themselves on Pharaoh's bad side and tossed into prison – most likely because he sensed one of them tried to poison him themselves, and since he couldn't figure out which one it was, he had them both put in jail. And as it so happened, they end up in the same jail as Joseph, and Joseph is assigned to watch over them.

Verses 4b-8... “After they had been in custody for some time, each of the two men—the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt, who were being held in prison—had a dream the same night, and each dream had a meaning of its own. When Joseph came to them the next morning, he saw that they were dejected. So he asked Pharaoh's officials who were in custody with him in his master's house, ‘Why do you look so sad today?’ ‘We both had dreams,’ they answered, ‘but there is no one to interpret them.’ Then Joseph said to them, ‘Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell me your dreams.’”

Dreams were a big deal in the ancient world, especially in Egypt. Egyptians believed that the gods communicated to them through dreams, and that dreams revealed important things about your future. Since dreams were often symbolic and bizarre, they needed to be interpreted, and interpreters were hard to come by. When King Nebuchadnezzar had a dream in Daniel 2, he summoned all his wise men, sorcerers, and astrologers, to tell him what he dreamed, and they were stumped. They said, “No human on earth can reveal its meaning.” Nebuchadnezzar didn't like their answer and ordered their execution. When Daniel was brought in the king said, “Can you tell me what my dream is all about?” Daniel said, “No one but Yahweh, the true God, can explain it, and I'm here as His servant to interpret it for you.” When he did, the king was so impressed that he made Daniel ruler over the entire province of Babylon.

Long before Daniel came along, God gave Joseph the gift of interpreting dreams. One day Joseph notices that cupbearer and baker look sad. “Are you guys alright?” he said. “You look a little down.” If anyone had the right to be sad it would be Joseph, and yet he’s aware of how others are hurting. Rather than focus on his problems, he is attuned to the needs of others. If you’re unhappy and depressed, one of the best things you can do is find someone with a need and meet that need. Research shows that helping others benefits you mentally, emotionally, and physically. Those who are self-absorbed and consumed with their own problems experience higher levels of depression and poor health – but turning the focus on others gets you out of your own skin, connects you to others, and gives you a sense of meaning and purpose.

Rather than focusing on his own sadness, Joseph notices the sadness of these two men. “Why the long faces?” he asks. “We both had dreams last night,” they said, “but there’s no one to interpret them.” As it so happened, standing right before them was a dream interpreter extraordinaire, who interpreted his own dreams back in chapter 37. Joseph must have sensed the providence of God in these circumstances. “Here I am, languishing in this prison, and these two guys just happen to need their dreams interpreted.” These are the kind of moments you can look back on and see the hidden hand of God – He puts you in the right place at the right time, not by chance or coincidence, but divine arrangement.

“Tell me your dreams,” Joseph says. Verses 9-11... “So the chief cupbearer told Joseph his dream. He said to him, ‘In my dream I saw a vine in front of me, and on the vine were three branches. As soon as it budded, it blossomed, and its clusters ripened into grapes. Pharaoh’s cup was in my hand, and I took the grapes, squeezed them into Pharaoh’s cup and put the cup in his hand.’”

The cupbearer said, “There was this vine that grew up, and it had three branches that budded and blossomed and produced ripe grapes. I took the grapes and squeezed them into Pharaoh’s cup, and put the cup in his hand.” He says, “Does this make any sense? What in the world does this mean?”

Verses 12-15... “This is what it means,” Joseph said to him. “The three branches are three days. Within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your position, and you will put Pharaoh’s cup in his hand, just as you used to do when you were his cupbearer. But when all goes well with you, remember me and show me kindness; mention me to Pharaoh and get me out of this prison. I was forcibly carried off from the land of the Hebrews, and even here I have done nothing to deserve being put in a dungeon.”

Joseph says, “The three branches are three days, and in three days you will be restored to your position as cupbearer.” “But,” he adds, “When this happens, do me a favor – tell Pharaoh that I’m innocent and do whatever you can to get me out of prison.” Maybe, just maybe – he thinks – this will be my ticket out of here.

Meanwhile, the baker is listening in on the conversation, and thinks, “Maybe my dream is good news too!” Verses 16-17... “When the chief baker saw that Joseph had given a favorable interpretation, he said to Joseph, “I too had a dream: On my head were three baskets of bread. In the top basket were all kinds of baked goods for Pharaoh, but the birds were eating them out of the basket on my head.””

Where the cupbearer saw three branches of grapes, the baker sees three baskets of bread. Only instead of serving the bread to Pharaoh, birds come and eat them out of the basket. In the Bible, birds often symbolize evil – like in the parable of the sower where the birds swoop down and snatch the seed of the gospel, preventing people from being saved. Seeing birds in your dream was an ominous sign.

Verses 18-19... “This is what it means,” Joseph said. “The three baskets are three days. Within three days Pharaoh will lift off your head and impale your body on a pole. And the birds will eat away your flesh.” Two very different outcomes – Pharaoh will lift the head of the cupbearer and enjoy the favor of the king, while Pharaoh will lift the head of the baker up on a pole for the birds to peck away at. One will live and one will die.

Verses 20-22... “Now the third day was Pharaoh’s birthday, and he gave a feast for all his officials. He lifted up the heads of the chief cupbearer and the chief baker in the presence of his officials: He restored the chief cupbearer to his position, so that he once again put the cup into Pharaoh’s hand—but he impaled the chief baker, just as Joseph had said to them in his interpretation.” Apparently, the baker was guilty of trying to harm the king and paid for it with his life, while the cupbearer was proven innocent and restored to his position.

Although Joseph did not realize it at the time, he would one day look back and see God’s plan in having him encounter the cupbearer and baker, who just so happened to have dreams, and just so happened to run into Joseph, the only one who could interpret their dreams.

And it just so happened that the cupbearer had immediate access to Pharaoh, who also just happened to have a set of dreams and was looking for an interpreter – which would set the stage for the cupbearer to say, “I know just the person to help you!” Without realizing it, Joseph is getting closer and closer to the fulfillment of his dream.

But that dream would have to wait. The chapter ends with yet another disappointment for Joseph. Verse 23 says... “The chief cupbearer, however, did not remember Joseph; he forgot him.” It’s like watching a movie and you keep waiting for the happy ending but it keeps getting delayed. The last three words of the chapter are: he forgot him. First, Joseph is betrayed by his brothers; then he is falsely slandered by Potiphar’s wife; and now he is forgotten by the man he helped gain his freedom.

Joseph had every reason to be bitter, but there's no hint that he was. What drove him and kept him alive was a steadfast dedication to the purpose of God. Through each setback and heartbreak he clung to the dream God gave him at age 17 – that his family would one day bow down to him. He didn't know why they would do that, but he knew God called him to do something great and he refused to give into bitterness and despair.

While your circumstances may be much different than Joseph's, we can all relate to living in the tension of the unknown. From Joseph's life we learn three qualities that bolster us as we wait on God to reveal the next chapter of our lives.

Number one is the quality of **faithfulness**. Wherever Joseph was placed, he bloomed where he was planted. When he was a slave in Potiphar's house, he didn't mope around but he worked hard, he gained the trust of his master, and was promoted. When he tempted, he didn't give into temporary gratification, but stayed faithful to God. When put in prison, his character and attitude helped him gain the trust of the warden and earning another promotion. And when he noticed the sadness of the cupbearer and baker, he was quick to help them, and his ministry to them would eventually bring about his freedom.

Someone said, "The secret of your future is hidden in your daily routine." The things you do every day, especially the little habits and routines you practice, all contribute to a positive, long-term outcome. Ecclesiastes 9:10, "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might." If you're a student, be the best student you can be with the abilities God has given you. If you get hired to work somewhere, be the best employee you can be. If God calls you to a certain ministry in church, do it with all your might.

Theodore Roosevelt said it this way, "Do what you can, with what you've got, where you are." What a great quote, and one beautifully modeled by Joseph. In every situation he made the best of his situation and gave it all he had. In each situation he used his God-given skills of management and leadership, he showed care and compassion, and he used his gift of interpreting dreams. The best part is: it didn't matter where Joseph was – whether he was in a pit, serving as a slave, or serving in prison.

A second quality Joseph models is **perseverance**. It's not hard to be faithful for short spurts of time, but it's another thing to be faithful over the long haul, over months and years and decades, through all seasons of life. Altogether Joseph would spend 13 years in slavery and prison – all for something he didn't do.

There's a phrase that author Eugene Peterson used as the title of one of his books: *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. In his book Peterson talks about how our fast-paced, instant-results culture demands that everything happen quickly – we get annoyed when the circle on our internet spins round and round, and when our fast-food order takes more than three minutes. But the qualities God wants to develop in our lives – like faithfulness, integrity, humility, maturity, compassion, and generosity – takes time.

And it also requires testing. Joseph's perseverance was tested over the course of 13 years – hard, dark, depressing years when God seemed completely absent. Yet it is only in the trials of life that perseverance is developed. Nearly every person God called in the Bible was tested over a long period of time before God used them. Romans 5:3-4 says... “We also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.”

Perseverance means, “to bear up under difficult circumstances.” It's the ability to remain in a difficult situation without giving in or giving up – and no one had more difficult circumstances than Joseph. Perseverance produces character. Character means that each time you persevere through a trial, you come out the other side stronger, more resilient, and more like Christ. Ray Stedman said it this way: “God is in the process of making veterans. He delights to take raw, untested rookies and put them in the crucible. When they come out, they aren't raw or untested and they aren't rookies anymore. They're veterans, men and women of proven character. The only way this can be accomplished is through suffering.” And character produces hope. Hope is the expectation that God works all things – even prison, even being forgotten – God works all things together for good.

And that leads us to the third quality modeled by Joseph: **trust**. Since we don't know the details of our future, we must constantly trust God in every circumstance, even when those circumstances don't make sense. If anyone had potential trust issues, it would be Joseph. He couldn't trust his brothers, he couldn't trust Potiphar or his wife, and he couldn't trust the cupbearer – everyone in his life turned on him and betrayed him. When you've been betrayed by other people, it can also make you gun-shy to trust God. But the Bible over and over says that God – being God – is absolutely trustworthy. When He makes a promise, He will keep that promise. It may take time, it may take testing, and it might require suffering – but God will come through each and every time.

That's why you have to let the story of your life play out. Joseph's story is so inspirational because we get to see how all things do work together for good to those who love God and are called according to His purpose. Joseph's story in the Bible is concluded, but yours is still being written, and while you're waiting for the final chapters to be written...

- Be faithful – every day – even in the small details of life – do all you can, with what you've got, wherever you are.
- Persevere – bear up under your difficult circumstances and have a long obedience to God in the same direction.
- Trust God – your situation might test your faith and cause you to waver, but have confidence that God will see you through your trial and make you more resilient in the process.

I don't know about you, but I'm glad God has not revealed everything about our life to us, but we can rest upon the sure promises of God that our future is safe in His hands.