

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, September 13, 2009**

## **WHAT HAPPENED NEXT**

**Genesis 40:1-8**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Lord was David's shepherd. And David knew it. The Lord was Joseph's shepherd, too. He guided Joseph. He protected Joseph. He blessed Joseph in the midst of the most perplexing circumstances. He shepherded Joseph through the painful experience of rejection and mistreatment by his brothers. He kept Joseph safe in the presence of his enemies, even when his brothers sold him into slavery and he was taken against his will to Egypt. The Lord kept him safe when false accusations were made against him and he ended up in prison for a crime he did not commit.

Through it all, the Lord was Joseph's shepherd. Through it all, the Lord did not forget Joseph. And through it all, Joseph did not forget the Lord.

As we continue our study of the life of Joseph, we turn today to Genesis 40. Let us give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's Word.

### **POSTSCRIPT FROM LAST WEEK**

I have to begin today with a postscript from last Sunday's message. The message, you may remember, was about Joseph in the house of Potiphar and the unsuccessful efforts by Potiphar's wife to get Joseph to go to bed with her. After one of the services last Sunday, someone asked me an excellent question. Here it is:

*Do you think Potiphar really believed his wife in her accusation against Joseph?*

That is an interesting question, don't you think? Maybe you've wondered about it. The Bible doesn't give us the answer. The Bible does say that when Potiphar heard the accusations his wife made against Joseph, "he burned with anger" and had Joseph thrown in jail (Genesis 39:19-20).

So we know Potiphar was angry. But the Bible does not explicitly tell us why or with whom Potiphar was angry. Conventional wisdom would suggest it was Joseph he was angry with, since Joseph is the one who was put in prison, and the punishment was swift. But some Bible commentators surmise that Potiphar knew what kind of woman he was married to. They suggest that Potiphar's anger in this situation was not directed at Joseph, even though Joseph is the one who was punished.

I don't know for sure, but it could be that Potiphar had heard rumors about his wife's "extracurricular activities" and was really angry with her for trying to seduce Joseph. It could be that he was angry because, even though he didn't believe his wife, in order to save face, he

had to punish his “Hebrew slave” (39:17). It could be that Potiphar was angry with his wife because he feared God would remove His blessing from their household as a result of her false accusation against Joseph.

Some Bible commentators think that if Potiphar had really believed his wife and thought Joseph was guilty of attempted rape, he would not have put Joseph in jail. He would have put Joseph to death. In a New York minute. The fact that he had Joseph put in prison instead may indicate that Potiphar thought Joseph was innocent of his wife’s charges against him. But he had to take some action to show who was boss.

Whether Potiphar believed his wife or not, Joseph ended up in prison. Genesis 40 tells us what happened next in the unfolding story of his life. Joseph was in jail. But he was not abandoned. The LORD was with him, as we saw at the end of Genesis 39 (verses 21-23).

The charges against him were false. But Joseph’s suffering was real. The Scripture speaks to this kind of situation in 1 Peter 2:20, where it says: “How is it to your credit if you are punished for doing wrong and you endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God.”

Spurgeon wrote: “If something is right, though you may lose by it, it must be done; if it is wrong, though you would gain by it, you must scorn the sin for your Master’s sake.” Isn’t that exactly what Joseph did concerning Potiphar’s wife? Character, integrity and faithfulness to God were more important to Joseph than his own pleasure or selfish interest.

Yale law professor Stephen L. Carter has written: “Integrity is like the weather; everybody talks about it but nobody knows what to do about it.” Joseph knew what to do about it. He lived it. He modeled it. He incarnated it. Even when he suffered as a result.

### **THE DREAMS OF THE CUPBEARER AND BAKER**

While he was in prison, Joseph met Pharaoh’s cupbearer and baker. They had done something to offend the king – the Bible doesn’t say what – and, as a sign of his displeasure, he had them both thrown in jail.

Their titles may not sound too impressive to us, but the cupbearer and the baker were two of the most trusted and important men in the court of Pharaoh. The baker was in charge of preparing all of Pharaoh’s food. It was like being the White House chef. The cupbearer was the one assigned to taste all of the king’s food and drink before giving it to him, to make sure it had not been poisoned or otherwise contaminated.

Later on in the Old Testament, you may recall, Nehemiah was cupbearer for King Artaxerxes in Persia. As cupbearer, Nehemiah had a close personal relationship to the king. The same was most likely true of the cupbearer for Pharaoh in Egypt.

But something had happened to incite Pharaoh's anger against these two officials. Something had happened to rupture Pharaoh's trust in them. So it was off to the slammer for them. And they did not know what their fate would be.

As we read, each of them had a dream one night (40:5). They were despondent because there was no one they could turn to in prison to interpret their dreams. You know how Joseph responded when he heard about it: He said: "God can interpret your dreams" (40:8). He didn't say: "I can do it." He said: "God can do it." Like his great-grandparents Abraham and Sarah before him, Joseph had learned that nothing is too hard for the Lord (Genesis 18:14). Nothing. If anyone could interpret dreams, it was God. And Joseph expressed his confidence and faith not in himself or his abilities, but in God and God alone. Joseph knew that if he could do anything – including interpreting dreams – it was because God gave him the ability. And the credit belongs to God.

If you read the rest of the story in Genesis 40, you will see that both of them, the cupbearer first and then the baker, told Joseph their dreams, who then told them the meaning of their dreams. Joseph told the cupbearer he would be restored to his former position within three days. Because he himself was in prison unjustly, for a crime he did not commit, Joseph asked the cupbearer to remember him when he (the cupbearer) was released from prison and restored to his prominent position in Pharaoh's court. Joseph then told the baker the meaning of his dream. Unlike the cupbearer's dream, this one did not have a happy ending. Joseph told the baker that within three days, he would be executed by order of Pharaoh.

And it happened to both of them just as Joseph said. The interpretations Joseph gave came true.

It is important for us to understand that in the ancient world, many people believed that God revealed Himself and spoke to people through dreams. Dreams played an important role in the lives of several key figures in the Bible. For example, in Genesis 28, Jacob dreamed of a stairway to heaven with angels going up and down, and in his dream God Himself spoke to Jacob. We have already noted Joseph's dreams in Genesis 37. Next Sunday we will look at Genesis 41, with its focus on the dreams of Pharaoh and Joseph's interpretations of those dreams. Daniel interpreted the dream of Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 2), as well as having dreams and visions of his own (Daniel 7-12).

In the New Testament, of course, there is the dream of Joseph, Mary's husband, in Matthew 1, when an angel appeared to him and told him about the son to whom Mary would give birth (Matthew 1:20-21). In Acts 10, at a pivotal moment in the history of the church, Peter dreamed of a sheet coming down from heaven with all kinds of animals, reptiles and birds on it. After a lesson on the story of Peter's vision, a teacher asked the children in her Bible class: "What did Peter see when he went up on the housetop to pray?" One little boy waved his hand and shouted: "Pigs in a blanket!" Not a bad answer to the question, is it?

In Acts 16, we read that in a dream one night, the apostle Paul saw a man from Macedonia calling out to him: "Come over to Macedonia and help us." Paul saw that as a sign from

God, and took the gospel to the cities and towns of Macedonia in his second missionary journey.

Sometimes God spoke to people through dreams. The Bible is clear about that. Does God still reveal Himself to people through dreams today? Some people believe He does not. We have to be careful here, because certainly not every dream we dream has spiritual significance or some message from God in it. In fact, in our culture, it is probably rare for God to speak to us through dreams. But I do believe that God can and does still speak – in some instances – through dreams.

Let me tell you a story about a woman who had a dream that God used to draw her to Himself. Mary Poplin (How is that for a name – it is almost Mary Poppins!) went to church as a child, but eventually pursued other spiritual paths, including Buddhism, Transcendental Meditation and even telepathic attempts to bend spoons. She is a professor and dean at a university in California. Here is her story in her own words:

“[I knew] a graduate student who lived his life differently. First of all, he prayed for me for 8 years. And he would say irritating things like, ‘If you ever want to do anything with your spiritual life, I’d like to help you.’ That was irritating because I thought I was doing plenty with my spiritual life. You know, I was bending spoons.

“And the other, more distressing thing is, he would ask me questions like, ‘Do you believe in evil?’ And I would realize I couldn’t answer the question consistently.

“He worked at our university as a professor for a year on sabbatical, and when he left I had a dream. I still felt empty and confused, and in the dream I was in a long line of people suspended in the air. The line seemed eternal on both ends. Jesus was standing greeting us in line.

“When I looked at Jesus, I knew immediately what I was seeing. I couldn’t even look at Him, but for a second. I fell down (at) His feet and started weeping, and the only way I can describe the feeling is that I could sense every cell in my body, and I felt total shame in every cell. Then Jesus grabbed my shoulders, and I felt total peace, like I had never felt in my life. I woke up, and I was crying.

“So I went to the phone, and I called this gentleman. He had never told me he was a Christian. But I called him and said, ‘I think I need to talk to you about my spiritual life. He said, ‘Let’s meet for dinner.’ At dinner he said to me, ‘Why do you think you have to do something with your spiritual life now?’ And out of my mouth came something I’d never thought about. I said, ‘I have some black thing in my chest. And I don’t know what it is.’ He just nodded, and I told him the dream. I said, ‘What do I do?’

“He said, ‘Do you have a Bible?’ He made sure I had one before we split up that night. He said to me, ‘You could read five Psalms a day and one chapter of Proverbs,’ And I thought, *Well, okay, I’m going to do it. I mean, I’m really going to do it this time.* And then he said,

since Jesus was the one in your dream, you might even read the New Testament. That's how casual he was about that.

"I began to read them, and we began to meet in a town between our cities about once a week. That was November to January. In January my mother wanted to go to North Carolina where she had grown up. We went to this little Methodist church; not because she was religious, she just wanted to see her friends.

"When we got there, I was really moved to just go up to the altar and give my life to the Lord. It wasn't even an altar call. It was a communion call. The guy said (that is how she referred to the pastor, as 'the guy'), you don't have to be a member of any church to take communion. You just have to believe that Jesus Christ lived, that He died for your sins, and you have to want Him in your life. And when he said that, I was so powerfully moved that I actually thought, even if a tornado rips through this building, I'm going to get that communion.

"(When) I took the communion, I knelt down and said, 'Please come and get me. Please come and get me. Please come and get me.' And when I took the communion and said that, I felt free."

The Lord Jesus revealed Himself to Mary Poplin in a dream and sovereignly, graciously drew her to Himself in faith. When she took the step of faith and trusted in Him, He set her free and changed her life.

Isn't that an awesome story?

It may well be that God reveals Himself and speaks through dreams to people from other cultures and religious backgrounds more than He does to people like us. I don't know. I do know that Fuller Theological Seminary did a survey of 750 former Muslims who had come to faith in Christ. Among the most-cited reasons they gave for their conversion to the Christian faith, #6 on the list was "God had used visions and dreams to influence the converts' decision."

Praise God! And remember that if God speaks today through dreams or visions, He will never, ever contradict or change what He has already revealed to us of Himself and His will in His Word. You can be sure of that.

### **FORGOTTEN BUT NOT FORGOTTEN**

There is one more thing I want to bring to your attention before I close. This particular story did not end on a happy note for Joseph. His interpretations of the dreams of the cupbearer and baker did come true. He had asked the cupbearer to remember him and to speak to Pharaoh on his behalf when he was released from prison and restored to his office (40:14). But here is how this part of the story ends in verse 23: "The chief cupbearer, however, did not remember Joseph; he forgot him."

Forgotten. Abandoned. Trapped in prison which would be his home for two more long years (Genesis 41:1). For many people, it is not an actual prison that confines us but a prison of circumstances. Some of you today may feel imprisoned by your circumstances. Maybe you feel trapped by life. Maybe you have felt the pain of rejection or abandonment. Maybe, at some level, you feel forgotten. All these things can lead to bitterness or disillusionment with life.

Joseph, though, did not become bitter or disillusioned. The cupbearer had forgotten all about him. He did not remember Joseph. But God did. God did not forget Joseph, though it may have seemed to Joseph that it was taking God forever to act on his behalf. God did not forget him.

And I want to remind you that, whatever you're dealing with in life, God has not forgotten you. He *will not* forget you. He will never leave you and He will never forsake you (Joshua 1:5). No matter what you go through. God will not forget you. He is with you. And He will be with you always.

Through it all, the Lord will be your shepherd, too. If you let Him.

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.