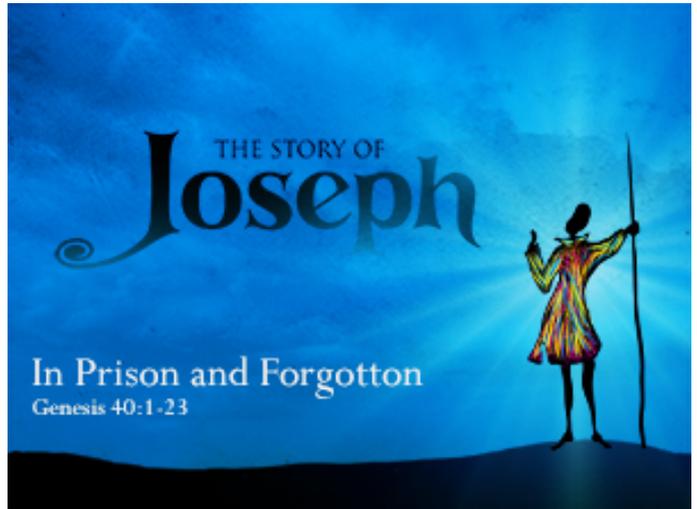


IN PRISON AND FORGOTTEN

13th May 2018

Readings: Genesis 40:8-19; Luke 23:35-43

In 1960 Wang Ming Dao was sentenced to solitary confinement for his faith. He was an evangelist and critic of the Chinese state run church. However when released from prison some 20 years later his faith was as strong as ever. His endurance became an inspiration for millions and a frustration to the Chinese communist party. Reflecting on his time in prison he said...



“When I was put in jail, I was devastated. I was an evangelist. I wanted to hold crusades all over China. I was an author. I wanted to write books. I was a preacher. I wanted to preach sermons. But in jail I had no Bible, no pulpit, no audience, not even pen and paper. I couldn’t even witness to my jailers because they pushed my food through a flap. I could do nothing... except get to know God. For the next twenty years that became the sweetest relationship I’ve ever known”.¹

This morning as we pick up Joseph’s story we find also he’s in prison and he’s been there a long time. We’re not sure how long - but it’s thirteen years from the time he’s sold into slavery and then released from prison. Thirteen years! Most of these in jail. But, like Wang Ming Dao he had a great faith in God. Listen to what Joseph said to his brothers many years later...

“You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.” Genesis 50:20

Indeed, Joseph emerged from prison with a faith stronger than when he went in. And this morning we’re going to explore how this happened. We’re going to track God’s hand on Joseph as his hopes are raised, then dashed. We’ll also look at implications for us and finally how all this points to Christ.

Let’s pray

¹ Ronald Boyd-MacMillan, *Explosive Preaching*, 266

The last time we looked at Joseph, Potiphar's wife had falsely accused him of sexual advances. Now, these lies were the equivalent of a death sentence, for this was a capital offence. So, as we pick up the story in Genesis 39:20 hanging or some similar fate is on the cards. Let's dive in and see how Joseph gets on.

Joseph's master took him and put him in prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined. Genesis 39:20

Imprisoned but not hung. Great news - as far as it goes. But imprisoned and abandoned! No, not abandoned. You see God's hand was still with Joseph.

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. Genesis 39:20b-23

Where have we heard this before? Four times in chapter 39 we're told the Lord was with Joseph. Twice in Potiphar's house and now here in prison. And because God was with Joseph, Joseph was successful, finding favour first with Potiphar and now with the Prison Warden. Joseph might not know why, but while a slave and now a prisoner God's hand was on him.

And this brings us to the first implication for us today. Our first take home. Like Joseph, in fact in a greater way than Joseph, God is with us. That no matter how grim our situation, no matter how dark, no matter how desperate, as we look to Jesus, as we cling to Jesus, God is with us. Listen to this wonderful promise in Hebrews 13

God said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?" Hebrews 13:5-6

God says... then we say. What a wonderful dynamic. God promises and so we respond. "Never will I leave you", says God. "The Lord is my helper", say you and I. While in prison both Wang Ming Dao and Joseph were able to say the same. Wang Ming Dao said, because God has promised to be with me I can say "The Lord is my helper" - as could Joseph and as can we. Listen, a number of us are in difficult places. Or if we're not now, we will be one day. It probably won't be a literal prison, but circumstances are tough and we feel caught, pinned down, trapped. Maybe it's with health or finances, or a significant relationship - and it's been going on for years.

What's God saying this morning - God's Word for you - is, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." And so we respond by in faith saying -, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?" This then is the first implication. Our first take home for today.

Let's see how Joseph gets on.

Some time later, the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt offended their master, the king of Egypt. Genesis 40:1

"Some time". Months, maybe years after being thrown in prison, two of the king's officials are also thrown into prison and come under Joseph's care. Again in verse 4b

After they had been in custody for some time...Genesis 40:4b

Again, months, maybe years later the cupbearer and baker have troublesome dreams on the same night. The next morning they look so dejected and miserable Joseph's asks...

"Why are your faces 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." Genesis 40:7-8

So, the cupbearer kicks-off by describes seeing three branches with ripe clusters of grapes. He squeezes these grapes into Pharaoh's cup and serves the king. Then God gives Joseph this interpretation...

"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." Genesis 40:12-14

Well, chief baker's been listening and he's spurred on. In his dream he had three baskets on his head. The top basket contained baked food for the Pharaoh but birds were eating these delicacies. Again God gives Joseph the interpretation...

"The three baskets are three days. Within three days Pharaoh will lift off your head and hang you on a tree. And the birds will eat away your flesh." Genesis 40:18-19

That's a bit grim! Hung and left for birds to eat your flesh! This is no one's idea of a good outcome. So what happens? Did Joseph get it right? What was their fate? Well, three days later it just happens to be the Pharaoh's birthday. In front of his guests Pharaoh reinstates the cupbearer but orders the baker to be hanged - just as Joseph said.

Now, news travels fast and we can be sure Joseph heard of their fate in double quick time. We can imagine Joseph going to bed that night thanking God and imagining within a few days all will change. The cupbearer will speak to Pharaoh and all would be right for God's hand was on him. However, verse 23...

The chief cupbearer, however, did not remember Joseph; he forgot him. Genesis 40:23

In prison and forgotten. How many feel like that? Forgotten and in prison. Hopes raised and then dashed. This is not looking good at all. But before we see how this plays out let's look at a second implication for us. The first was God promises never to leave us and so by faith we declare "The Lord is my helper" - even in the darkest place. The second is while we are in our dark place, God can use us. Look at Joseph. Years in prison, but even there God used him to bless the warden and the cupbearer - others no doubt as well. Joseph spoke God's word to the cupbearer and baker and lives were changed. It's the same for you and I. "How", you might ask. "How can I be used by God even when I'm struggling?" Ephesians 2:10

For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. Ephesians 2:10

Joseph was God's workmanship. Like wood under a carver's hand Joseph was slowly been worked into something most wonderful, beautiful, a work of art bringing much pleasure to its creator. Even in prison God was at work preparing Joseph for greater things. So too with us.

We may be struggling with a major financial setback, even to the stage that we may lose our house, when a colleague opens up at work we share Jesus with them. And God makes a difference. Or we may be struggling with depression and we've a friend who's unwell. We visit them in hospital and find ourselves praying for them - and when we do God makes a difference. Listen. Don't let your present difficulties stop you from being used by God. Don't let your prison - whatever that may be - be an excuse. It gives God particular pleasure to use even the weakest amongst us to bless others. He specialises in it. Our Heavenly Father takes great delight in having the weak bless others. You can know the joy of serving the Living God, even amongst your struggles. Go on. Give it ago. God will meet you in a special way when you do. This then is our second take-home for today. Even in our struggles we can bless others.

But how does Joseph get on? What's God got in store? Surely it's good news. Surely Joseph will be reward for his integrity and honesty and doing the right thing. Genesis 4:1

When two full years had passed... Genesis 41:1

Two full years! Now, these dreams must happened when Joseph was 28 as we're later told he was 30 when released. Our brash 17 year old youth, sold by his brothers 13 years earlier, is now a young man. A young man shaped and molded by God. Not bitter or twisted as many in his situation would be, but a young man equipped and trained ready for God's mighty plan. Thirteen years earlier he had two dreams of everyone bowing to him, two years earlier he had interpreted the cupbearer and bakers dream and now at the bringing of chapter 41 he's about to interpret two more dreams, the Pharaoh's dream. And when he does everything changes. But this is the next chapter and our next sermon.

And so, as we've considered Joseph in prison, how does all point to Christ? Given all the Old Testament points to Jesus. Given every story whispers his name, how does Joseph's story foreshadow Jesus?

Well, in many respects the cupbearer and baker represent humanity. Just as the cupbearer and baker offended the king and deserved judgment so all humanity has offended the great King, the Living God, our Maker and Creator. And, because of our offence, our rebellion, we're all under God's judgment. Deservedly so. Listen to Romans 3:9-12

Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one." Romans 3:9-12

However, despite deserving punishment, the king offers a free pardon. Despite the cupbearer being guilty, he's forgiven and restored. Wonderful news for the cupbearer but not so for the baker. Yes, we're missing something here? We need to move this closer to Christ. For, the cupbearer and baker are like two thieves crucified either side Christ. One on his left and one his right. Both are guilty in the eyes of the Roman law. Yes, in the eyes of the Roman king, Caesar, both deserved death - neither deserved to be pardoned. But one criminal trusted Jesus, the Great King. He looked to Christ while all others abandoned Christ. And because he did this criminal was pardoned. But the other rejected Jesus. Not only rejected but mocked and ridiculed and despised and so remained condemned. Listen to how this played out on that first Good Friday, on Calvary...

One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!"

But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.”

Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

Jesus answered him, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.”
Luke 23:39–43

And this is the choice lying before each of us. Like the cupbearer, the baker and the two criminals we stand guilty before the King, the Great King. Not one of us deserves to be pardoned. But, when we look to Jesus, when we trust him, everything changes. The chains fall off, we’re set free, our burden rolls away and we’re forgiven. Not only is our slate wiped clean but we’re welcomed into paradise. Yes, we’re invited to walk with Jesus even as Adam walked with God in that very first paradise - but even more so.

But, to all those who mock, reject or simply ignore Jesus - there is no pardon. Judgment still stands. A judgment that will see us hanged with our flesh eaten by birds. A grim description of hell if there ever was.

So let’s pull all this together. Joseph is thrown into jail but was not abandoned by one who really counts. Though forgotten by the cupbearer he was not forgotten by God. And because God was with him, Joseph was a blessing to others. Others, like the warden and cupbearer. From this we also draw strength because when we’re in tough space as we look to Christ we know God is with us and were not forgotten and abandoned. Not only this, but we don’t have to have our act together before God can use us. We can know the joy of serving God, blessing others, even when the world and circumstances are against us.

And we’ve also seen the echo of Christ in this story. For as the cupbearer was forgiven and restored before Pharaoh so, as we look to Jesus, like the thief on the cross, we also are restored and forgiven by the Living God. Not only this, we too will walk with Jesus in Paradise as we fix our eyes on him, the Author and Perfecter of our faith. Maranatha. Come Lord Jesus Come. Amen