

Main Idea: Genesis 40 teaches us that even in the lowest points of our lives, even if we feel forgotten and forsaken, God is still at work.

A Look Back at Previous Losses...

1. Joseph had lost his family (ch 37).
2. Joseph had lost his freedom (ch 39).
3. Joseph had lost his reputation (ch 39).

I. When we feel forgotten, let's remember the story of Genesis 40.

- A. We see the people (1-4).
 1. We meet Pharaoh's cupbearer.
 2. We meet Pharaoh's baker.
- B. We see the problem (5-19).
 1. Pharaoh's officials both had strange dreams.
 2. By God's help, Joseph interpreted the dreams.
- C. We see the party (20-22).

II. When we feel forgotten, let's remember the significance of Genesis 40.

- A. Here's what the significance is *not*.
 1. It's not to promote dreams.
 2. It's not to impress us with Joseph.
- B. Here's what the significance *is* (23).
 1. The passage shows us that God never forgets us.
 - a. That's true though we may feel forgotten.
 - b. That's true though people may forget us.
 2. The passage encourages us to trust in God and wait on His timing.

Looking Back Can Help: "*Under the shadow of Thy care, Thy saints have dwelt secure.*"

Scripture Reading: Psalm 34

It's wonderful to know the Living God personally, to belong to His family, which is possible by His grace through total trust in His Son, Jesus Christ. Because of what Christ did for us on the cross, we can experience eternal life and enjoy God forever.

But enjoying God forever doesn't mean we won't suffer for Him in the present. We will. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," says Paul to young believers in Acts 14:22.

And when the hardships come, we may not feel the presence of God. We may feel more like the bird Max Lucado tells about in his book, *In the Eye of the Storm*:

"Chippie the parakeet never saw it coming. One second he was peacefully perched in his cage. The next he was sucked in, washed up, and blown over.

The problems began when Chippie's owner decided to clean Chippie's cage with a vacuum cleaner. She removed the attachment from the end of the hose and stuck it in the cage. The phone rang, and she turned to pick it up. She'd barely said "hello" when "ssssopp!" Chippie got sucked in.

The bird owner gasped, put down the phone, turned off the vacuum, and opened the bag. There was Chippie -- still alive, but stunned.

Since the bird was covered with dust and soot, she grabbed him and raced to the bathroom, turned on the faucet, and held Chippie under the running water. Then, realizing that Chippie was soaked and shivering, she did what any compassionate bird owner would do . . . she reached for the hair dryer and blasted the pet with hot air.

Poor Chippie never knew what hit him.

** Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ This message is adapted from two series at WBC in 1992 and 2002.

A few days after the trauma, the reporter who'd initially written about the event contacted Chippie's owner to see how the bird was recovering. "Well," she replied, "Chippie doesn't sing much anymore -- he just sits and stares."²

There are times when life doesn't make sense, even for people who have been redeemed by God. Frankly, there may be times when we the redeemed feel *forgotten* by God.

I think of Robert Somerville, and a conversation I had with him a few years ago after he taught a workshop which later became a book. *If I Am a Christian, Why Am I Depressed?*

Bob is a professor of Biblical Counseling at The Master's College in California. He is a fellow with the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors and has devoted his life to teaching and counseling from the scriptures. He's been a well-loved pastor/teacher for thirty-five years.

And in the past ten decade he has struggled with severe depression.

I appreciated his transparency, as we talked, and later in his book, particularly because 2012 was the year I struggled with dark days, literally as I battled migraines in the basement, and figuratively as I wrestled with difficult questions, like, "What good is a pastor who is spending so much time in darkness, often can't read his Bible or look at a computer screen and be with people?"

[Read Bob's story on pages 15-17]

Perhaps you can relate. No doubt you know people who can.

What should we do? What does the Lord want us to do when we're living in the dark?

Thankfully, He doesn't just tell us, but He *shows* us.

Our text is Genesis 40, which teaches us that even in the lowest points of our lives, even if we feel forgotten and forsaken, God is still at work and invites us to trust Him.

Joseph was a man who, humanly speaking, had ever right to feel that he was forgotten by God. In his early years, he had been his father's favorite son. But Dad-Jacob set Joseph up for great heartache by giving him preferential treatment, specifically by placing an ornamental coat of many colors on his shoulders. His ten older brothers despised him.

Then the bottom fell out of his life. Joseph was a young man at the time, around seventeen years of age. But by the time he was around twenty, he had lost nearly everything a person could value.

1. *Joseph had lost his family (ch 37).*

His brothers sold him into slavery. His father, whom he loved more than anyone in the world, was deceived into thinking he had been killed by a wild animal. Joseph would not see his beloved father for what would seem like thirteen eternal years.

2. *Joseph had lost his freedom (ch 39).*

In the prime of his youth, Joseph became a slave in a far away country. There he knew noone. He had been betrayed by his own flesh and blood. He had lost his freedom. In the eyes of the world, he was no longer a person, but a piece of property owned by a man named Potiphar.

3. *Joseph had lost his reputation (ch 39).*

I think this was perhaps the most painful to bear. Joseph did what was right. When Potiphar's wife tried to seduce him, he remained loyal to his master and to his God. He said "No!" to the enticement of sexual sin. He did the right thing.

² Max Lucado, *In the Eye of the Storm*, Word Publishing, 1991, p. 11.

But it all seemed to backfire. The crafty Mrs. Potipher framed him. She fabricated a lie and said he was the guilty party, that he attacked her. And he was helpless to protect himself. Who would believe his word against hers? He was a lowly slave. She was married to a man who worked for the Pharaoh of Egypt! In a legal system that provided few rights for the lowly, he was assumed guilty until proven innocent.

So he was thrown into prison. He had lost everything--his family, his freedom, and now his reputation. As we open Genesis 40, we find Joseph in the darkest valley of his life. And it's going to get even darker before we leave.

So what should we do when we feel as if God has forgotten us? When that happens, we need to remember two things from Genesis 40.

I. When we feel forgotten, let's remember the story of Genesis 40.

When the story begins, Joseph is in prison, a special prison reserved for political prisoners. Even in prison, though, God was real to Joseph. God's hand was so evident in his life that the warden promoted him to administrator of the prisoners.

Listen to the final verses of chapter 39 (21-23): "The LORD was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden. ²² 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. ²³ 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."

The Lord was with Joseph. Whether he felt it or not, it was true. Even in prison God was there. Now let's look at the three episodes of the story in Genesis 40.

A. We see the people (1-4). Verses 1-2 "Some time later, the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt offended their master, the king of Egypt. ² Pharaoh was angry with his two officials, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker."

Here we're introduced to two staff members of Pharaoh's administration.

1. *We meet Pharaoh's cupbearer.* He's called the "butler" in the KJV. The word indicates he was not a blacksuited doorhop, but the king's personal beverage attendant. Nehemiah had the same job for King Artaxerxes. The cupbearer tasted the king's drink first to make sure it wasn't poisoned and would be pleasing to his boss.

2. *We meet Pharaoh's baker.* What he did is self-evident. He was in charge of baking what the king ate.

We're told these men "offended" their boss. How, we're not informed. Maybe Mr. Baker burnt the king's pastries and Mr. Cupbearer spilled some juice on his boss's favorite shirt. Regardless what they did, here's what happened.

Verse 3 "And put them in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, in the same prison where Joseph was confined."

Now the plot thickens a bit. While Mr. Cupbearer and Mr. Baker are awaiting their trial, they are detained in the same political prison holding Joseph.

The same prison? A coincidence? No such thing when there is a sovereign God.

And notice who is in charge of this prison, according to verse 3. "The captain of the guard." And who was that? According to Genesis 37:36, it was Potiphar. That may indicate that Joseph has regained some of his master's trust, for look what he does in verse 4.

"The captain of the guard assigned them to Joseph, and he attended them." So the cupbearer and baker were put into Joseph's care. For how long did he attend them? The end of verse 4 speaks of being in custody "for some time," though we can't be sure just how long that was.

So ends episode one. We see the people.

B. We see the problem (5-19). Verse 5 says, “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.”

1. *Pharaoh’s officials both had strange dreams.* How coincidental that both men dreamed peculiar dreams the same night! Or was it a coincidence?

You see, God is using this story to teach us something about life, and that includes the dark seasons of life. Nothing just happens. There are no coincidences.

The next morning Joseph made his rounds. Verses 6-8, “When Joseph came to them the next morning, he saw that they were dejected. ⁷ So he asked Pharaoh’s officials who were in custody with him in his master’s house, ‘Why are your faces so sad today?’ ⁸ ‘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.’”

In ancient Egypt, as in other countries, people had strong beliefs about dreams. It was not uncommon to rely on dreams to unveil the future. So when these two Egyptian officials had similar dreams the same night, they were sure they related to their destiny.

But they had a problem. Since they were locked away, they had no access to the interpreters commonly sought in Egypt.

Then along came Joseph. Joseph is quite a man of God. He’s certainly a great model for us in many ways. One of the things we’ll see Joseph do throughout his life is bring God into his conversations with people. Not in a forced, canned manner, but naturally. Here, when the cupbearer and baker are stumped by their dreams, Joseph points out with conviction, “Do not interpretations belong to God?”

I like that. Joseph wasn’t interested in bringing attention to himself. That’s pride, and God hates pride. But God loves humility, and here Joseph humbly redirects these two men’s attention to God.

That’s evangelism. Pointing people to their Maker. Helping them see that they need Someone they’ve been ignoring.

2. *By God’s help, Joseph interpreted the dreams.* 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, ¹⁰ and on the vine were three branches. As soon as it budded, it blossomed, and its clusters ripened into grapes. ¹¹ 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.’”

That’s an intriguing dream. The cupbearer says he saw a vine with three branches, which budded and produced grapes. Then Mr. Cupbearer saw himself squeeze juice out of the grapes into a cup, and give it to Pharaoh.

What did all this mean? Keep in mind that Joseph did not interpret the dream because he was so smart or skillful. He’s already acknowledged that the interpretation must come from God.

And from God it came in verses 12-13, “‘This is what it means,’ Joseph said to him. ‘The three branches are three days. ¹³ 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.’”

There’s the meaning. Mr. Cupbearer, in three days you’ll be out of jail. Pharaoh will restore you to your job.

Then Joseph threw in a PS. Verses 14-15, “But when all goes well with you, remember me and show me kindness; mention me to Pharaoh and get me out of this

prison. ¹⁵ For 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.”

We can feel for Joseph. He'd been wronged by people again and again, by his brothers' who sold him, by Potiphar's wife who framed him, by Potiphar who sentenced him. No wonder he makes this appeal. "Mr. Cupbearer, don't forget me! Please don't."

Mr. Baker liked what he heard, so he took his turn. 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. ¹⁷ 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.’”

Another strange dream. The baker was walking with three baskets of bread on his head. You can still see this practice of carrying baskets on the head in the Middle East today. In the top basket, there were baked goods intended for Pharaoh, in fact, verse 17 says, “all kinds of baked goods” [KJV, "all manner of foods"]. I read that there were 38 varieties of cakes and 57 varieties of breads (Kidner).³

But something happened as the baker was bringing the bread to Pharaoh. The birds started eating the goods in the top basket. Not a good sign.

Then came Joseph's interpretation. Verses 18-19 “‘This is what it means,’ Joseph said. ‘The three baskets are three days. ¹⁹ Within three days Pharaoh will lift off your head and hang you on a tree. And the birds will eat away your flesh.’”

Notice the obvious play on words...

v 13 to the Cupbearer--"Pharaoh will *lift up* your head."

v 19 to the Baker--"Pharaoh will *lift off* your head."

What a difference one little adverb makes!

So did Joseph really believe these dreams meant what he said? There's no doubt. He knew this was from God. In fact, he makes no request to the baker about making mention of him before Pharaoh. Why not? He knew it would do no good. In three days, Mr. Cupbearer would be exonerated, while Mr. Baker would be executed.

The story reaches the climax in the third episode. The people, the problem, and...

C. We see the party (20-22). Did you ever wonder when they started celebrating birthdays? At least 3,800 years ago, according to verse 20.

“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.”

Everything happened just as Joseph predicted. On the third day, Pharaoh threw a grand party. He invited all his official staff, including the two imprisoned household servants. It was some party.

But not everyone celebrated. Verses 21-22, “He restored the chief cupbearer to his position, so that he once again put the cup into Pharaoh’s hand, ²² but he hanged the chief baker, just as Joseph had said to them in his interpretation.”

Prediction fulfilled. End of party. End of story.

When we feel forgotten, we need to remember the story of Genesis 40. I need this God-given reminder that I’m not the first person to face hardship. “These things happened to them as examples,” says 1 Corinthians 10:11. “No temptation has taken you except what is common to man,” says verse 13.

It’s good to know we’re not the first to struggle, but is that it? Did God preserve this story just to encourage us to hang in there? No. There’s a second reminder.

³ Kidner, *Genesis*

II. When we feel forgotten, let's remember the significance of Genesis 40.

I want to examine the significance of Genesis 40 from two angles. First...

A. Here's what the significance is *not*...

God did NOT give us Genesis 40 to do the following.

1. *It's not to promote dreams.* Now, did God use dreams to reveal things to His people in Bible times? Yes. We've already seen the dreams He gave to Joseph in chapter 37. And there are many others.

God spoke to Jacob through dreams (Gen 28). As He did Solomon (1 Kings 3:5). And Daniel (Dan 7:1). In fact, the word "dream" appears in Daniel's book over twenty times. He told another Joseph not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife through a dream (Matt 1:20). Still later, the Lord gave special visions to Peter in Acts 10 and Paul as described in 2 Corinthians 12.

So in Bible times, God did use dreams and visions to give information to people. But what about today? Does God communicate through dreams? There are many reports coming from the Middle East about Muslims who were confronted with their need to trust Jesus the Messiah through a dream.

Certainly God can do whatever He so chooses, including use dreams.

But the question is, does God still want us to *depend* on dreams for guidance? Is that why we're given this story?

I believe the answer is *no*. I believe that God gave Joseph and other biblical characters special guidance through dreams, yes, but there's something different about us. We have something they didn't have. We have God's complete special revelation, the sufficient Holy Scriptures. And because we do, we have no need for extra revelation.

Peter, who himself experienced a vision, had this to say to second generation Christians in 2 Peter 1:3. "His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness."

And after describing the wonder of his experience on the mount of transfiguration, Peter said this in 2 Peter 1:19, "And we have the word of the prophets made *more certain*, and you will do well to pay attention to it."

So we have something better than an experience with God. It's better than dreams and visions from God. It's "more certain." And what is it? Peter says it is the *word of the prophets*, the Scriptures.

The prophet Jeremiah had this to say in the sixth century BC (Jeremiah 23:28). "Let the prophet who has a dream tell his dream, but let the one who has my word speak it faithfully. For what has straw to do with grain?" declares the LORD. ²⁹ "Is not my word like fire," declares the LORD, "and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?"

Do you want God's direction for your life? Do you want to know what pleases Him, and how to make sense of what's happening around you? Don't wait for a dream. Be a student of the Word He has already given us.

2. *It's not to impress us with Joseph.* Yes, Joseph was quite a man, and we can learn much from him. But if we close the book at Genesis 40 impressed merely with Joseph, we've missed the main character. There's something, *Someone*, far more noteworthy here than Joseph's moral example.

B. Here's what the significance is... (23) Notice verse 23, "The chief cupbearer, however, did not remember Joseph; he forgot him."

So the cupbearer ends up being just like everybody else in Joseph's life. All he thinks of is himself. When Joseph needed him the most, he forgot him.

You say, “Well, Mr. Cupbearer just got caught up in the moment, with the birthday party and his new lease on life.”

No, this wasn't a momentary lapse of memory. Look at the very next verse (41:1), “When two full years had passed.”

Joseph was a forgotten man for another two full years. Wow, just when you think things can't get worse for Joseph, they do. Blow number one, he was betrayed by his brothers and sold as a slave. Blow number two, he was framed by Potiphar's wife and sent to prison. Blow number three, he was forgotten by the only man who could help his hopeless cause.

Three strikes and you're out! Right? Not so fast. The story of Joseph in Genesis 40 illustrates two valuable lessons for us.

1. *The passage shows us that God never forgets us.* Never. God never forgets His people.

a. **That's true though we may *feel* forgotten.** And there are times when we will feel that way. Why would that be? Because we can't see God nor what He's up to.

b. **That's true though *people* may forget us.** And that too will happen at times. People that could help us won't.

Verse 23 is so real. It takes us right down into the pit that held Joseph (and may be holding us). He'd been forgotten by men, and perhaps at times felt forgotten by God.

That's how Mary Verghese felt.⁴ Mary was a resident doctor under Dr. Paul Brand, well known Christian doctor who specialized in care for leprosy patients and author of *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made*. Mary was serving in a leprosy hospital in India with Dr. Brand when the following occurred.

One day she went on a picnic outing with other young doctors. The station wagon was driven by a new driver out to demonstrate his bravery. Impatiently, he tried to pass a slow school bus without looking in time to see an oncoming car. He swerved to miss the car, but threw the car over a bridge and tumbled down a steep embankment.

Mary Verghese, promising young doctor, lay motionless at the bottom of the bank. Her lower limbs dangled uselessly like two dead tree trunks.

Her next few months were almost unbearable. The therapy was agonizing. Her body would not respond. Her feeling was gone. Her spirits sunk into despair and sourness.

Then Dr. Brand came to her, “Mary, I think it's time to begin thinking of your professional future as a doctor.”

At first she thought he was joking, but he wasn't. He predicted that she could serve God as a doctor, perhaps bringing sympathy to patients that no ‘healthy’ doctor could.

She eventually took the challenge. She began to work with leprosy patients. Do you know what happened? Leprosy patients whispered among themselves about the doctor in the wheelchair who was more disabled than they.

Mary's recovery would involve many excruciating hours of therapy as well as major spinal surgery. But she had a glimmer of hope. She began to see that the disability was not a punishment sent by God to entrap her in a life of misery. Rather, it could be turned into her greatest asset as a doctor. She had instant rapport and acceptance with disabled patients.

One day Dr. Brand saw Mary rolling along in her wheelchair and asked how she was doing. She responded, “At first the threads seemed so tangled and broken, but I'm beginning to think my life may have a pattern after all.”

⁴ Story told in *Where Is God When It Hurts?* pp. 88ff.

Phillip Yancey concludes, “By turning toward God and accepting the fact that He could weave a new design for her life, Mary Verghese has probably achieved far more than she ever would have if the accident had not occurred.”⁵

You say, “I don’t see any good coming out of Joseph’s story in Genesis 40.”

But the story isn’t over. Just wait until Pharaoh has a dream and needs an interpreter, and a famine hits the Middle East and Joseph’s dad and brothers need food. Oh, this story is far from over.

That brings us to a second purpose. One, Genesis 40 shows us that God never forgets us.

2. *The passage encourages us to trust in God and wait on His timing.*

Yes, Joseph was forgotten by men and felt forgotten by God. That meant he had a choice to make. Either live by how he felt, or live by *faith*.

How does a person become a Christian? By faith. And how does a person live the Christian life? The answer is the same. By faith.

Romans 1:17 says, “The just shall live *by faith*.” (Gal 3:11; Hab 2:4)

Joseph’s faith was not dependent upon his circumstances. His faith was dependent upon the character and promises of his faithful God.

Joseph knew what God had revealed to him through the dreams in Genesis 37. But it wasn’t just the dreams. He knew the promise God had made to his great-grandfather, and how he responded. “Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:6).”

He also knew what Abraham did with that promised son, how he took him to Mount Moriah, as God instructed, and was prepared to offer him on an altar, until God stopped him, provided him with a ram to sacrifice instead of his son.

And he knew what Abraham called that place. *Jehovah Jireh*. The LORD will provide. “And to this day it is said, ‘On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided.’”

Yes, Joseph knew that the trials were not the end of his story. He also knew that his story was part of a much bigger story, God’s story, the story of God working through Jacob’s family to ultimately rescue a world of lost sinners by sending His own Son to become a sacrificial lamb on that mountain.

Indeed, the Lord will provide.

In many ways, Joseph is a picture for us of the Lord Jesus Christ.⁶

--Joseph was the well-beloved son of his father. So was Christ. (Matt 3:17)

--Joseph was sent by his father, and willingly went to do his will. (John 3:16)

--Joseph was victimized by the hateful plot of his own. (John 1:10)

--Joseph was tempted and did not yield. (Matt 4)

--Joseph was accused and condemned wrongfully. (Matt 26:59, 65). Isaiah 53:3-4 says of Christ, “He is despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows...yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.”

--Later Joseph was exalted and given power over all Egypt. (Matt 28:18)

--Ultimately, the people of Egypt and the world, and even Joseph’s brothers, would come to Joseph that their lives might be saved (47:25). Acts 4:12 says of Jesus, “Neither is there salvation in any other; for there is...”

There in the lonely prison, Joseph was learning that he must put his trust, not in his feelings, not in people, but in the promise-making God who cannot lie.

So must we.

⁵ Ibid. p. 90.

⁶ see Alan Stringfellow, “Through the Bible in One Year”

Perhaps you're a young person whose friends have turned their backs on you. Maybe you're stinging because of a boss's broken promises. Possibly you've endured the pain of an unwanted divorce. People have let you down. And it will happen again in this world.

How should we respond? By putting our total trust in the Faithful One who so loved us that He gave His only begotten Son for us.

Yes, God will at times allow us to go through periods where He seems distant. His purpose? He's fulfilling His saving plan, and giving us an opportunity to trust Him.

Psalm 30:7 "Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God."

Psalm 9:10 "Those who know your name will trust in you, for you, LORD, have never forsaken those who seek you."

Psalm 91:2 "I will say of the LORD, 'He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.'"

Perhaps you're struggling to trust Him. Isaac Watts offers a practical suggestion. *Looking back can help.*

*O God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast,
And our eternal home.*

*Under the shadow of Thy throne
Thy saints have dwelt secure;
Sufficient is Thine arm alone,
And our defense is sure.*

*Before the hills in order stood,
Or earth received her frame,
From everlasting Thou art God,
To endless years the same.*

*A thousand ages in Thy sight
Are like an evening gone;
Short as the watch that ends the night
Before the rising sun.*

*Time, like an ever rolling stream,
Bears all its sons away;
They fly, forgotten, as a dream
Dies at the opening day.*

*O God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Be Thou our guide while life shall last,
And our eternal home.*

Watts is right. Looking back *can* help us trust as we move ahead. So let's sing some take-home theology (#52).