

“The God Who Remembers”

Genesis 41:1-36

Turn with me in your Bible this morning to Genesis 41, and we will read beginning with verse 1. We'll read all the way through verse 36. (Read)

In our study of Scripture, we discover that the experience of delay is written large in the lives of God's servants. For example, we read about Abraham's long wait for the son of promise. Then there are 40 years of preparation which Moses faces in the desert before being sent to Egypt. We read about David's long struggle with being sought after by Saul. And we have also seen the years of waiting Joseph has had to endure imprisoned in Egypt.

V. Raymond Edman — *“Delay never thwarts God's purposes; it only polishes His instrument.”*

In other words, he uses delay in our lives to prepare us for what He has prepared for us. Joseph's life story up to this point seems like setback after setback, one disappointment right after the other. What begins with a dream ends up in a nightmare. He is betrayed by his brothers and sold as a slave. He is falsely accused and cast into prison. But what he might have seen as a setback, heaven saw as a setup. God is working behind the scenes in Joseph's life to bring him to the place in which He has in mind, but it will involve preparation. The Lord will prepare Joseph for what He has prepared for Joseph. The theme that runs through chapter 41 is divine orchestration. Perhaps no chapter in the book of Genesis so vividly and plainly displays the hidden hand of God like this one:

- God gives Pharaoh two important dreams
- God reminds the cupbearer about a dream interpreter
- God leads Pharaoh to summon Joseph from prison
- God moves Pharaoh to choose Joseph to be in charge

Proverbs 21:1 — **“The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it where He will.”**

By this point in his life, we wonder if Joseph felt forgotten. The last verse of chapter 40 says that “the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him.” While it is true that Joseph might have been forgotten by man, the thing we must keep in mind is that he is remembered by God. The Hebrew word translated ‘remember’ is frequently used of God throughout the Old Testament in a significant way. For instance:

Genesis 8:1—“But God remembered Noah...”

Exodus 2:24—“So God heard their groaning; and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”

1 Samuel 1:19—“...and the Lord remembered Hannah.”

“Remember”—*to act decisively on behalf of someone*

It is not that God forgets His people, and then remembers after a season of absent mindedness. Instead, it means that God goes to work on their behalf in keeping with His promise. This word is used in verse 9 by the cupbearer, while the actions of God’s remembrance of Joseph are certainly seen. And from this, we are able to learn some important principles about how God ‘remembers’ His people. The first thing that I want you to see is that:

1—God’s WAYS are much higher than ours (41:1-8)

“After two whole years, Pharaoh dreamed...in the morning his spirit was troubled, and he sent and called for all the magicians of Egypt and all its wise men. Pharaoh told them his dreams, but there was none who could interpret them to Pharaoh.”

In the stories of the men and women in the Bible who are used of God, we see this truth that God’s ways are much higher than our ways. Man has a way of doing things, but God’s way is higher and far more superior than man’s way. If we were telling the story, there’s a strong likelihood that we probably wouldn’t have chosen an infertile couple who were past childbearing years through whom the promised seed would come. But that’s what God does with Abraham and Sarah because His ways are higher than ours. Neither would we have determined that the cross be the way that God’s Son bring about

our salvation. But that's what God does because His ways are higher than ours. And in Joseph's life, we wouldn't have anticipated that a prison be the place where God will bring His plan into focus.

Isaiah 55:8-9—“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.”

It is impossible for you and I to second-guess God because His ways and thoughts are beyond our comprehension. It is foolish to think that He thinks and acts the way we do. In Joseph's life, we are given insight into how:

He operates according to His schedule

Notice verse 1 says that two whole years went by in his life. It was a long time to wait. F.B. Meyer has a section in his study on the life of Joseph in which he imagines Joseph's joy when the cupbearer promises to remember him. The fellow probably said, “If you're right and I get out of here and back into Pharaoh's good grace, I'll definitely put in a good work for you, even give you a job on my staff. You can count it!” On the day the cupbearer is released, maybe Joseph walked with him to the door of the prison, caught a glimpse of blue sky in the distance, before it closed again. Later that day when the door opened again, Joseph maybe ran to it, thinking that the cupbearer had made good on his word. But it wasn't him. The next time the door opened, he perked up again, thinking finally the time has come. But again it wasn't him. Days passed into weeks, and weeks turned into months. So that before long, when the prison door creaked open, Meyer imagines that Joseph no longer looked up. Human hopes had disappointed him. Man had forgotten him. And two years have now passed. “Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him.”

Joseph had helped others, had done right, had given hope—and yet was left in prison alone. Being forgotten feels like being left in the dark all by yourself. Being forgotten strikes at the heart of our deepest human needs—the need to be seen, valued, and remembered. Genesis 2:18 says, “It is not good that the man should be alone.” Wired

into the fabric of our DNA is a deep desire to be known. When someone forgets us, we feel invisible as if we don't matter. Our identity is often heavily shaped by how others respond to us and being forgotten leads to feelings of insignificance.

Joseph is not forgotten where it counts. He is not discarded and placed on a shelf. He's merely in the waiting room. Joseph probably prayed something along the same lines as the psalmist:

Psalm 13:1—“How long, O Lord? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me?”

The blank space in your Bible between chapters 40 and 41 represent a two year period of time in which there's nothing exciting or eventful happening in Joseph's life. Swindoll is right when he describes it as “a long, dull, monotonous, unspectacular, slow-moving grind. Month after month after month of...well, nothing.” Of course, that's from our own perspective. We may think that nothing is happening, but the reality is that a whole lot is happening from God's point of view. He operates according to His schedule, not ours. And His timing is always perfect.

Chuck Swindoll — *“All whom God uses greatly are first hidden in the secret of His presence, away from the pride of man. It is there that our vision clears. It is there that the silt is removed from the current of our life and our faith begins to grasp His arm. Abraham waited for the birth of Isaac. Moses didn't lead the Exodus until he was eighty. Elijah waited beside the brook. Noah waited 120 years for rain. Paul was hidden away for three years in Arabia. The list doesn't end. God is always working while His people are anxiously waiting.”*

He orchestrates the details of history

One night, Pharaoh has a dream that he was standing by the Nile, and there came up out of the river seven plump, well-fed cows. Then seven thin cows came up after them, and soon ate up the fat cows. Verse 4 says, “And Pharaoh awoke.” (Talk about a dream that was ‘udderly’ terrifying. He probably woke up in a bad ‘moo-d.’) But when he fell back asleep, he dreamed again, and this time he dreamed of seven healthy ears

of corn growing on one stalk. After them, seven more thin ears sprouted up and consumed the healthy ears. He woke up again, and it was all a dream. It was a restless night in which his mind could get no rest and there was nothing but these troubling dreams. Tossing and turning, one nightmare after another. There wasn't a pillow soft enough to save him from the tyranny of his own mind, nothing to soothe his conscience. And today it remains the same, all these years later. If a person tries to make sense of their world by trying to pillow their head on some false cushion, it will be an empty and useless pursuit when the Lord begins to trouble their spirit. Our only hope of rest is in the gospel of Jesus Christ! He said, "Come to Me!"

Pharaoh is having dreams that he knew were significant, but he was incapable of understanding them. In spite of all his power and possessions, he found himself totally unable to soothe his own soul. Verse 8 says, "So in the morning his spirit was troubled." He calls for all the magicians and wise men of Egypt, he tells them his dreams, but there was no one who could interpret to them Pharaoh. This is not the only time in Scripture that we are told God communicated to pagan leaders in the form of a dream. There is a similar thing that happens in Daniel 2 with King Nebuchadnezzar:

Daniel 2:1-2—“Nebuchadnezzar had dreams; his spirit was troubled, and his sleep left him. Then the king commanded that the magicians, the enchanters, the sorcerers, and the Chaldeans be summoned to tell the king his dreams. So they came in and stood before the king.”

Like Pharaoh, King Nebuchadnezzar sends for all the wise men of his kingdom, but they too are unable to provide him with any answers. There is no one in his kingdom who can tell him what his dreams mean. The wisest and brightest in Egypt were incapable of seeing and discerning this dream that had come from God. It illustrates how the philosophy of the world is nothing but foolishness to God. The apostle Paul writes about this and says:

1 Corinthians 2:14—“The natural man receives not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.”

The best that his kingdom had to offer were no help to the Pharaoh. When it came to providing an answer, they could not get the job done. It is merely proof that the world, with all of its pseudo-science, philosophy, and false religion, it is powerless to unlock the mysteries of life and its meaning apart from the divine truth that is only revealed by the Spirit of God. His ways are higher than our ways. And secondly:

2—God’s WISDOM is greater than ours (41:9-24)

“Then the chief cupbearer said to Pharaoh, ‘I remember my offenses today. When Pharaoh was angry with his servants and put me and the chief baker in the house of the captain of the guard, we dreamed on the same night, he and I, each having a dream with its own interpretation. A young Hebrew was there with us, a servant of the captain of the guard. When we told him, he interpreted our dreams to us, giving an interpretation to each man according to his dream. And as he interpreted to us, so it came about. I was restored to my office, and the baker was hanged.’ Then Pharaoh sent and called Joseph, and they quickly brought him out of the pit. And when he had shaved himself and changed his clothes, he came in before Pharaoh.”

Not only do we see how God’s ways are higher than ours, but notice also that His wisdom is greater than ours. In his desperation, Pharaoh calls in his government reinforcements. All the king’s horses, and all the king’s men. But all these powerful people in the land, as those who had access to the halls of power, could not fix the problem.

Psalm 20:7—“Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God.”

All of Egypt’s wise men are incapable of providing Pharaoh with insight. God didn’t allow human wisdom to bring about an answer to the problem. But then notice how in verse 9, the cupbearer suddenly remembers Joseph. After two long years, the man shakes off the cobwebs from his memory and tells Pharaoh about his experience. Something had triggered a reminder of his own situation and the young Hebrew prisoner he met in the jail. We know that it wasn’t something, but Someone. Friend,

that's God! That's the way He works and comes through in our lives, often when we least expect it. Some call it luck, while others call it chance or fate. But as the followers of Jesus, those words should not exist in our vocabulary. We call it providence. God, in His infinite wisdom, has orchestrated these events in His own timing.

His wisdom is revealed

Verse 14 says, "Then Pharaoh sent and called Joseph, and they quickly brought him out of the pit. And when he had shaved himself and changed his clothes, he came in before Pharaoh." In prison with no end in sight one minute, and in the palace of Egypt the next. That's how it goes with God's wisdom. If you are in the midst of a situation, and it looks like things are never going to get better, just hold on a little bit longer. God's way is higher than yours, and His wisdom is greater than yours. He won't leave you in the furnace a second more than is necessary to accomplish His purpose and reveal His glory. Martha and Mary learned this lesson in John 11. When it seems like He is four days late, He's still on time. When all you see is death and the tomb, the Lord has a resurrection in mind! Joseph is going to be brought from death to life, from the darkness of the grave and into the light of glory. Such is the future of every child of God. He will not forget or forsake us in the prison.

1 John 3:2—"Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when He appears we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him as He is."

Imagine the potential intimidation factor that Joseph could have experienced as a young man who has been in prison now being summoned to stand before the Pharaoh himself. He is about to have an audience with the most powerful man in the world. Would he fall to pieces? Will he cave in to the pressure and flatter Pharaoh by telling him only what he wanted to hear? Many a man has succumbed to such temptation.

Charles Colson, in his book *Kingdoms in Conflict*, warned about the seduction of power, especially political power. He had been a former aide to President Nixon and a key figure in the Watergate scandal. He experienced firsthand how access to power can

corrupt. After his conversion to Christianity, he became an advocate for Christian integrity in the public square. But he tells the story of how when he would schedule guests to see the president, he would start by hosting them in the executive dining room of the West Wing. Then he made sure to walk them slowly down the hallways of power, so that the sights and sounds of it all would overwhelm them. And the goal was to impress and flatter them into submission with the president's agenda. He wrote:

Chuck Colson — *“Invariably, the lions of the waiting room became the lambs of the Oval Office. No one ever showed outward hostility. Most, except the labor leaders, forgot their best rehearsed lines. They nodded when the president spoke, and in those rare instances when they disagreed, they did so apologetically, assuring the president that they personally respected his opinion. Ironically, none were more compliant than the religious leaders. Of all people, they should have been the most aware of the sinful nature of man, and the least overwhelmed by pomp and protocol. But theological knowledge sometimes wilts in the face of worldly power.”*

Joseph doesn't wilt in the face of worldly power. Instead, he speaks the truth. Pharaoh says to him, “I hear you can interpret dreams.” He says, “It is not in me! God is the One who will give Pharaoh a favorable answer.” There've been a lot of things we've seen about his life, but the most important of all that can be said about him is the fact that he was a man who lived a God-centered life. He was not self-centered, but was God-centered. He is not a 'me-oriented' kind of man. And that goes against much of the way our generation thinks and lives. Today's culture trains people to think more about themselves—how they look, what they want, how they feel—while discouraging humility, self-denial, and God-centeredness. The result is a society that values image over integrity, self over service. When self becomes the center of everything, narcissism grows.

What a refreshing alternative we find in Joseph—“It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer.” Egypt's hopes are not found in us. God is your answer, Pharaoh!

Would you desire to be saved, to know that your sins are forgiven, that heaven is your home, that your destiny is not separation in hell? Do you know what you have to say?

Like Joseph, you must come to the place where you admit, “I cannot do it. I cannot work to save my soul. I cannot make myself righteous enough. I can’t tip the scales in my favor. I can’t do it.” And if that was the end the matter, it would be a miserable existence for us all, but it isn’t. The answer is, “That’s absolutely right! You can’t do it. But there is one who has done it.” Joseph says “I can’t, but He can!” The disciples once asked Jesus, “Who then can be saved?” He answered, “With man it is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” And friends, it is through the acknowledging of my impossibility and His power that I am brought from darkness into His marvelous life.

His wisdom is reliable

After hearing Pharaoh’s dreams, Joseph provides the God-given interpretation, thus fulfilling a prophetic role. In the first dream, the seven fat cows represent seven years of abundance. They will then be followed by seven years of famine, represented by the seven thin cows. The famine will be so severe that the years of abundance will be long forgotten. Pharaoh’s second dream involving the ears of corn are the same, which Joseph explains in verse 25. He says, “God has revealed to Pharaoh what He is about to do.” In fact, we ought to count up the number of times that Joseph turns Pharaoh’s attention to God. He does so in verse 16, then again in verse 25, then again in verse 28, and then two more times in verse 32.

He is emphasizing a very important message to Pharaoh:

- The Lord is sovereign

That’s significant because the ancient Egyptians worshiped the Pharaoh and believed he was the living embodiment of the gods. But Joseph is boldly declaring the truth that only the Lord God is sovereign and in charge. There is nothing that Pharaoh can do to change it.

- The situation is urgent

In verse 32, Joseph says the double nature of the dream means that the thing is fixed by God, and God will shortly bring it to pass. So Pharaoh has a couple of options. On

the one hand, he can ignore the message and shoot the messenger. Or, on the other hand, he can believe God's message and spring into action while he has opportunity.

3—God's WILL is better than ours (41:25-36)

"Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, 'The dreams of Pharaoh are one; God has revealed to Pharaoh what He is about to do...God has shown to Pharaoh what He is about to do... the thing is fixed by God, and God will shortly bring it about.'"

God's ways are higher than ours, God's wisdom is greater than ours, and God's will is better than ours. What God intends for our lives is far better than our own intentions. Which is why Jesus taught us to pray, "Your will be done."

The plan that Joseph suggests

After the revelation and interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams, notice that Joseph offers application. As a prophet, he tells Pharaoh the truth of God's Word. But then he calls him to immediate action. Friends, that's the way it should always be for those who deliver God's Word. There must always be a call to active faith on our part.

Daniel 11:32—"The people who know their God shall stand firm and take action."

The situation was dire and required a wise and discerning man. Seven years of plenty would be followed by seven years of famine, and the famine would be so severe that the years of plenty would be forgotten. And if they were not careful, they would waste the plenty and be unprepared for the famine.

Now, we look at Joseph's plan here and we applaud him in his efforts. Thankfully, Pharaoh will take decisive action in response to what he hears. But the question I have for us is this, "Are we as prepared as they are?" Have you and I heeded the wisdom of Joseph to make hay while the sun is shining, to store up our grain while the supply is abundant? The Bible says:

Psalms 90:12—"Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom."

I read this week that a person's life is somewhere on average 78 years. That's roughly 41 million minutes. You'll sleep away 12.3 million of those minutes. You will spend at least 3 million of them eating. You will work for another 13 million. That leaves you with about 12 million. When you subtract things like showers and daily routines, you're down to about 6.5 million minutes. If you're 18, then you've already used up a quarter of your allocation. Or if you are 36-40, you've used up half. And that's provided you live to be at least 78. So in terms of unspoken-for time, you're looking at 5 million minutes. And those minutes are relentlessly ticking away. Is it any wonder the Bible says:

Ephesians 5:15-16—“Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.”

Are we carefully numbering our days, cashing in the time we have for what matters most, living with eternity in mind, or does Jeremiah's lament for the people in his day apply to us? He said this in what has to be one of the most somber verses in all the Word of God:

Jeremiah 8:20—“The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.”

There's the plan Joseph offers, and we'll come back to this later, but then notice:

The promotion that Joseph receives

Upon telling Pharaoh what his dreams meant, notice what happens. Joseph goes from being a forgotten nobody in an Egyptian prison to the world's most powerful man, next only to Pharaoh. He is shockingly exalted. Joseph is no longer wearing prison garb, and there are no more chains around his ankles. He is clothed with the royalty of Egypt. He is given a ring of authority, dressed in the finest linen, given a gold chain to wear around his neck, and is paraded in front of all of Egypt who are now commanded to bow the knee to Joseph. God had remembered his servant.

Friends, God's will is always better than ours. We see in part, but God sees the whole. We make decisions based on limited knowledge, emotions, and short-term outcomes.

Isaiah 46:10 says that He is the God who declares the end from the beginning, His counsel will stand, and He will accomplish all that He purposes. He knows what is best for our good and His glory.

Proverbs 3:5-6—“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will direct your paths.”

He is the God who remembers! He has not forgotten you, but will come through in your situation in just the right time. And when He does, it will be according to His ways, it will be in His wisdom, and it will be for the purpose of His will. In chapter 40, Joseph is forgotten by man. But in chapter 41, he is remembered by God—and that’s all that matters. God’s remembrance is not forgetfulness overcome—it is faithfulness in action. It gives us confidence that He sees us, hears us, and will move at the right time. While people may forget, God never does. And because He remembers, we can rest in that hope, trust His timing, and believe His promises.

Through all of his experiences, we’re able to see how Joseph points us to Jesus...

In His dying breaths on the cross, as the crowd was hurling their insults at Him, it looked like Jesus had been forgotten. He even cried out with the words of the psalmist, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” Luke 23 tells of how one of the criminals who was crucified next to Him railed at Him, “Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!” But the other criminal rebuked him and said, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same condemnation? And we deserve what we’re getting, but this Man has done nothing wrong.” And then the Bible says he turns to Jesus and asks, “Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.” And Jesus says to that dying thief, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in paradise!” And so it is with anyone who repents of their sin and turns to Christ in simple faith. He is indeed the God who remembers!