

Your life's in God's hands

Genesis 40

Would you want to know what is going to happen to you in the future? How would it be to live in the light of some good thing that you knew was coming your way? What would it be like to live with a countdown clock running towards some terrible things that you knew would befall you?

In Genesis 40, we read about two guys who get told what's going to happen to them in three days' time. For the butler, it's good news he's heading for - pardon, freedom, release, a new start. Would he dare believe it? Could he really pin his hopes on it? For the baker, it's the worst fate he's inescapably lurching towards - judgement, death, no hope of escape. What would it be like to be either of these guys?

At the end of the passage, the butler and the baker appear before Pharaoh. They're paraded into the birthday party as part of the evening's entertainment; made to kneel down before the King, their eyes fixed low to the ground whilst all other eyes were fixed on them. In the silence, Pharaoh revels in the delicious power over life and death that he wields in that moment.

He lifts their heads. And as he does, he chooses to lift one of them right up - the butler *is* pardoned, set free, lifted to life once more. And he chooses to lift one of them right off - the baker *is* decapitated and his body hung up on a pole for the birds to eat.

Pharaoh was just showing off on his birthday. He made this call, and no doubt everyone in the room, including Pharaoh, had it reinforced in their minds that people's lives were in Pharaoh's hands. But we've read the whole chapter. And what we learn from it is this - life is not in Pharaoh's hands, but in God's.

Before these gruesome revelries, we read about the scene in the prison. Two men have dreams on the same night - only because God had given them. In that time and culture, they'd be looking for a professional interpreter, but they couldn't get one stuck in prison - except God provided them one in Joseph.

Joseph accurately reads the dreams and predicts the fates of the men - and explains that it's only because God enabled him to. And things turn out just the way he said, to the very detail of heads being lifted (it's the same word in

Hebrew that Joseph uses in vv.13 and 19 about the lifting of heads, but in one case it's a head lifted up and in the other it's a head lifted off).

God made the future known in advance in Genesis 40. And in doing so, He teaches us a very valuable lesson. Life and death and the future are all in God's hands. Pharaoh only did on the night what God had already called three days earlier. Pharaoh didn't do anything that God didn't already both know and indeed control in advance.

Here's where we chew over the whole question of God's providence again; His 'being in control'. Sometimes people talk about God's 'foreknowledge' - that God knows, and has always known, what's going to happen in your future. But they stop short of saying that God planned purposefully for it to happen. 'Having your head cut off and getting eaten by birds? *That's* not the kind of thing God does... He *knew* it, but He didn't *do* it!'

But does that really make sense? I mean, if you *know* that someone's heading for the edge of a cliff, nobody's impressed with you if you stand back, watch them fall, and go, 'Ah! I knew that was going to happen! Didn't I say that?' Not when it's in your power to roll up the sleeves and *stop* it happening.

And this is where people have a problem with an all-knowing, all-powerful, all-loving God. Saying that God *knows* everything that is going to happen to us starts by sounding quite comforting. But it starts turning sour for us when we go: 'Wait a minute... why doesn't He stop it, then?'

When God showed the butler and the baker what their future was to be with a little help from Joseph, He wasn't just saying, 'I've just seen what's around the corner.' God was revealing, 'Here is what I have planned will happen.'

Now you can shout and scream or quietly huff at God for this if you like. You can blame God for every bad thing that comes your way or the way of our bashed up world. I for one can't see how that will get you anywhere though. For one thing, what does it achieve? Does it undo the hardship, or soften the sadness, to *pull away* from God over this?

For another thing, who do you think you're talking to? Do you think you've got a plan for your life or for this world that's going to work better? Do you really think you can manage things better than the One who can simultaneously co-ordinate and weave together 6 billion human stories - and creation in all eternity? Do you really think you have the *right* to?

This passage reminds us that life and death, your future and your destiny, are in God's hands. And that calls for a new humility from us before God. It calls for a greater sense of wonder at Him, a greater expression of dependency on Him, and a greater submission to His purposes worked out in His control.

It's one of those truths that come to us in Scripture and gets backed up in our life experience - surprising things out the blue that remind you that you're not King and you can't control everything - because *He* is, and *He* does.

Can God see what's coming without being responsible for it?

The Bible teaches that there are things *we* cause; that *we* are responsible for. Our sin is *our* sin. The devil's destructive schemes are the *devil's* destructive schemes. God is not the only cause of things, nor the only One with responsibility for them.

Nevertheless, the Bible also teaches that nothing happens except that God foreordained it. That is, He didn't just see it coming, He purposed it. All things happen within His control and purposes. And that is His responsibility.

If this causes our fear of the Lord God to rise, in the sense of knowing our very small place before His very great one, and in the sense of being struck in awe, that's good. If it causes our fear of the Lord God to rise in the sense of being afraid of Him because we're not sure about what He's going to arbitrarily decide to do on a whim in our lives, that's not good. And it's a misunderstanding that we should clear up.

You see, God doesn't do things arbitrarily. Never on a whim. Always with purpose, always with a plan. Romans 8:28 says: 'And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.' That's the goal for God's grand scheme.

Remember that we've said about this verse before that 'the good of those who love Him' doesn't always mean *you*, the individual. The bad things that happen to you - even your untimely death - may be for the purpose of blessing others to enter and flourish in God's family.

After all, that's exactly what God took on Himself as Jesus died on a cross for the good of those who love Him. There's a plan, and it's drawn up for the benefit of all those that God the Architect is bringing home as a family through faith in Jesus.

Read not just a chapter of Genesis, but a whole Bible, and you'll find something else about God. He's the best judo combatant ever. They say about Judo that's it's all about using your opponent's weight against them. When your opponent makes a move, you turn it round on them to defeat them.

All through the Bible, we read about terrible things happening where God's enemy and ours, Satan, is trying to destroy and drag down. But every time he tries it, God masterfully turns it round to bring about His own purposes. He sees every move coming, and has already planned how He's going to turn it around for eternal good and the defeat of the attacker.

He sees how that person running off the cliff must be allowed to play out, so that some surprising victory for God's saving purposes comes about through it. The ultimate example of this is in what God suffered Himself. He gave His own Son to die at the hands of the powers of evil, embedded in human souls.

But through it He defeated sin, death and the power of evil. Their sting was gone. Their poison sucked out of human destiny. And in the resurrection, a fatal body blow of a turn around was dealt to evil and its angry master. There's a judo match, and it only ever has one winner, in every move.

Read the whole Bible, and you'll also read about the consistency of God. Whatever He reveals will happen, does happen. That much you learn in Genesis 40 all of itself. Everything that God reveals is going to happen to the butler and the baker, down to the details, comes about. And this consistency of God with what He reveals is another thing that should take care of your fear about your life, death and future being in His hands.

Unless you tell me otherwise, God has not revealed to you in a dream that you're going to die in three days. But what He *has* revealed to you, in the message that this whole Bible is, is this: He made you. He loves you. You turned your back on Him.

Left as it is, you are guilty of sin - of saying, 'Shove off God, I'm in charge, Not you.' Death will come to all of us, and if you die in this state, whether three days, three years or three decades from now; you will be separated from God and life forever.

But the whole point of God revealing anything to you at all is *this*: He goes on to say that He wants to rescue you from this. He wants you to belong to Him.

He wants to be your King and Rescuer. For you to bow the knee and say, 'Okay God, life and death really are in *your* hands; I'll live with you in charge.' For you to accept the rescue that Jesus brought you in dying for your sin on two rough planks of wood.'

And the consistent, promise-keeping God says this: 'Those who trust in that death and resurrection of my Son for them - who believe it in their hearts, and declare it with their mouths - their destiny is life to the full, now and forever, in Christ alone.'

Now personally, I would rather that my life and death and future were in the hands of this God than in my own. Whatever He ends up revealing to me. Whatever He has got planned. I don't want to know what's coming in my earthly future. I only want to know - and this I do *know* - that my future is forever safe with Him, because He has said so.

Are you scared of any of these things?... Life Death The devil The future The past Loneliness Loss of control God

Is your fear of this bigger than your security in God being your King and Rescuer?

Pray, and offer time to chat and pray

God's plan can be tough. Poor Joseph has had setback after setback. Hated and rejected by his brothers. Sold by those same brothers, and taken against his will to a foreign land to become a slave. When things started looking up as he got his head down and served his new boss well, he got accused of a crime he didn't commit and landed up in prison. And now in Genesis 40, another slap in the face.

There's a ray of hope, light at the end of the tunnel in this chapter. Joseph's crossed paths with two of the most important officials in the whole nation of Egypt. People with the ear of the Pharaoh. If ever either of them got out of this prison, there was hope. Because the whole, 'It's not about what you know but who you know' thing might help Joseph out.

And then come these dreams... and Joseph knows what they mean. A smile may have spread across the face of the butler as Joseph told him the news that he'd live and be free; but it might have been spreading on Joseph's face, too. 'A bit of networking here, and I can see how things will turn around for me!' thinks Joseph.

So he says to the butler, 'When you're out of here, put in a good word with Pharaoh, will you?' Then everything happens just the way Joseph said the dreams foretold. The butler's free! 'Surely now...' thinks Joseph. 'Any day now...'

But days go by... and nothing. Days become weeks; weeks become months; soon a whole year goes by... and nothing. Then another year. Still nothing. The glimmer of hope for Joseph fades quickly. One more kick in the teeth.

Now, spoiler alert - the thing that Joseph wants, and that God wants for him: his freedom, and his family, it's all coming. But the thing that's hard to take is God's timing. We've talked before in this series on Joseph about God's timing in situations being really telling of His presence and His plan. But His timing is also often very different that the one we'd like to work with.

Joseph entered Potiphar's house as a 17 year old. The narrative is not clear about when during that time he got thrown into the prison that was a part of that house. But let's assume that Potiphar's wife didn't spend five years not noticing the lad before finally coming on to him. In chapter 41, we'll learn that Joseph was 30 when he was brought out of prison.

That means that Joseph spent up to 13 years in prison. *13 years* of waiting, wondering, praying, not understanding, wrestling, going back and forth in his mind. There were two years between Joseph trying this bit of networking to improve his lot, and the guy he'd asked for help remembering to mention him to Pharaoh.

God's plan is long term. He deals in lifetimes and aeons. He knows when there will be twenty years of *this* in our lives, before we ever get to *that*. When there will be opportunities that come up that we grab assuming that this *must* be the way God's going to change things for us here and now, when actually they're all part of the plan for much later down the line.

In short, God is more patient with the unfolding of His plan in our lives than we are. He hasn't forgotten you. Now you might think, 'yeah, well, that's easy for God - He can see how it all comes good, I can't!' Welcome to Joseph's world. We can't swap places. We can't be God in this. We can trust God in His long-game timing though.

Because it's not 'easy for God.' It's not easy for any parent to make their child wait for something when it's for their best to wait - whether that's

withholding food from a sick toddler, or keeping back your money from the teenager who's become too used to the bank of mum and dad. Parents will make the child wait until the right time *because they love them*. But that's never easy.

And it's not 'easy for God,' because He gave His own Son - at 'just the right time' as we're told in Romans 5:6 - to die for those who'd forgotten *Him*. The baker knew he'd die in three days. Jesus grew up from infancy, and some day along the way, maybe with a silent gulp, He realised that He'd die a violent early death too. It didn't hang over him for three days, but for years.

As an adult, He talked as if He knew when it was going to come - 'Not yet... not yet... okay, we're going to Jerusalem, because the time is coming now...' Whilst others ate and drank and sang and danced and laughed and joked and worked and just *lived*... Jesus journeyed ever closer to an ever larger looming cross.

It's not 'easy for God,' this 'knowing the plan' thing. It's not difficult for Him in a 'I'm not sure I can manage this' way. He's *God*, for goodness sake. But it's not easy for God in an unemotional, unaffected, 'I don't care how they feel about their lives and my plan' way.

Knowing the plan, and knowing the timing of it - that was always, and always will be, God's burden and privilege. Not knowing the plan, and not knowing the timing of it - that was always, and always will be, our burden and privilege.

What's in your life about which you struggle with God's plan and timing?

How does Joseph's story speak to you about that?

The last thing to look at from Genesis 40 is this - how we respond when people share with us their need for help. At the end of this passage in v.23, the butler 'ignores' and 'forgets' Joseph (both those Hebrew verbs are used). Joseph's requests for help are just out of mind. There's an immediate challenge for us there - whose expressions of need for help have we let slip our attention?

But earlier in the passage is a different kind of response to someone saying 'I need help.' In v.7, Joseph takes the trouble to ask the men why they're looking down. When they tell him why in v.8, they don't exactly ask him for

help. In fact, they probably assume this foreign teenage prison cellmate can't help them; not with this.

But Joseph does a couple of things we can learn from here. One thing he does is to make it known that he *is* able to help, actually, and more than that, he's offering. How often does someone open up enough to share a problem they're having, perhaps without the slightest clue that *you're* in a position to help with it - and you keep it quiet that you could help, hoping that someone else will offer (whether they're really able to or not)?

What he is able to help with, Joseph helps with. 'I'm actually pretty good with that sort of thing; and I've got time to help you with it if you let me take a look.'

But Joseph doesn't just say, 'I can interpret dreams, tell me them and I'll sort you out.' Joseph makes a point of testifying to God as he offers to meet this need. He actually *starts* with that in v.8. 'Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell me your dreams.'

If Joseph's got his plan in mind already of hoping that the butler will put in a good word with Pharaoh, it must have been tempting to focus all of that ability and help on himself. 'Get this right, Joseph, and Pharaoh and co will know your name and maybe depend on you in the future.'

But Joseph wants to attribute the help that he is giving people to the God who makes him able to do it. 'Get this right, Joseph, and Pharaoh and co will know the name of God and maybe depend on Him in the future.' Joseph could have used his gifts without mentioning that God's the One who made all this help possible. But he doesn't.

How about you? It's great when, as God's people who love others around us, we help them with the needs that they express. But are we testifying to God being the One that's bringing them this help? Are we using His name at all in being a blessing?

It just takes a little bit of thought, but it goes a long way to witness to the One that we really want people to lean on. You don't have to say, 'In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, I Hoover this hallway for you.' But what *could* you say?

If it's a financial problem you're able to help with, could it be, 'God's blessed us with more than enough, and He'd love you to have a piece'? If it's helping someone when things are falling apart for them, could it be, 'I've found God to be very interested in putting the pieces back together, so let's start here'?

Who's sharing with you their need for help?

Are you able to help in this way?

Are you offering to help in this way?

What would be a fitting way to share God's name as you do that?