

Interpreting Life, Genesis 40-41 by Shane Gould

Series: Beauty and Brokenness: God's Unfolding Story of Redemption

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Good morning, my name is Shane Gould, and I am one of the pastors here at North Shore Alliance. If you're joining us for the first time, we want you to know we are so glad you're here. I'm just back from a couple weeks of vacation where we got the chance to spend time as a family going to the beach and visiting a few parks – we enjoyed some real down time. It was a good rest, but I'm excited to be back and re-connected with things here at the church.

I don't know about you, but whenever I take vacation, whether for a few days or a couple weeks I go into reflection mode. On vacation, I take a few mental steps back to interpret life. While travelling in the car or out on a walk, my wife, Linda, and I are constantly thinking about life, talking about the things we've been experiencing, or pondering together changes that have come to our life. And every time we do, the conversation inevitably draws us to God: what He has been up to, the people He has brought into our lives, how He has been providing, what He's been teaching us, and how He has been graciously sustaining us in the ups and downs of our life. Our conversations often revolve around trying to interpret life from the way God would want us to see it, regardless of how mysterious his ways may seem at times. The title for this morning's message is Interpreting Life.

But I have to admit that interpreting life with eyes of faith doesn't come automatically. Unfortunately, all too often the way I live reveals a deistic tendency in me. A what? A Deistic Tendency. Deism was a religious philosophy that began to powerfully shape Western thinking in the 17th and 18th centuries – and, unfortunately, it still very much alive and well.

Deism holds that “God does not intervene in human affairs or suspend the natural laws of the universe. Deists typically reject supernatural events such as prophecy and miracles, tending to assert that a god has a plan for the universe that this god does not alter by intervening in the affairs of human life. This idea is also known as the Clockwork universe theory, in which a god designs and builds the

universe, but steps aside to let it run on its own.”¹

I don't know about you, but it's easy for me to sometimes think about God that way – that he has brought me into being but has stepped away. When looking at life that way, I begin making own plans, and plotting my own goals, as though God no longer intervenes in my life or the world. But the Bible tells us that that's not the way to interpret life. As we look at scripture, we see that God hasn't set the world in motion and walked away. It's just the opposite.

Proverbs 16:9

“In their hearts humans plan their course, but the LORD establishes their steps.”

This morning we are focusing on the Book of Genesis, as we have been doing all summer. For our purposes today, we are turning to chapters 40 and 41. These two chapters tell the story of how God revealed the future by giving dreams to three people. Through Joseph, God then gave the interpretation of each dream, which ultimately moved Joseph to be at the right place at the right time to fulfill God's plan to rescue his family, the descendants of Abraham and Sarah, from a coming famine.

If you have a Bible, I encourage you to turn to Genesis chapter 40, on page 65 in the blue Bibles in front of you.

Before we begin reading, you may remember that Joseph himself has had dreams from God, but Joseph's life has been anything but easy. At seventeen, God gave Joseph two unusual back-to-back dreams, showing him that one day he would be in a place of great power, where even his family would bow before him. The dreams didn't tell Joseph how this is all going to happen but simply pointed to the future God intended to bring about. Joseph's dreams acted a road sign, pointing to what was ahead.

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deism>

But in sharing his dreams, as we read about in chapter 37, Joseph finds no one celebrating. Instead, the jealousy of his older brothers drive them to secretly sell Joseph into slavery in the neighboring land of Egypt. And so for the next decade, Joseph lives as a household slave, successfully managing the affairs of his master, an Egyptian elite named Potipher. While there, Joseph is very successful. Joseph is also full of character. He resists and ultimately denies the sexual advances of Potipher's wife. But instead of being rewarded for his loyalty, he is wrongly imprisoned. In retaliation for rejecting her, Potipher's wife falsely accuses Joseph of sexual assault and he's thrown in jail.

In short, Joseph's dream has only sent him downward, first into slavery, and now into prison. How is to make sense of all that has happened to him, especially in light of the dream God gave him? In prison, he probably had plenty of time to be in reflection mode. Had God forgotten him? He must have been asking, why is this happening to me? How can God be in this?

Whether Joseph realized it or not, Genesis tells us that the way to interpret Joseph's life is to see that God was with Joseph the entire time. God was with him through it all, orchestrating his life, even through the evil intentions of others, so that Joseph would be at the right place at the right time for a higher purpose he couldn't yet see.

As Joseph went into slavery, Genesis chapter 39:2-4 tells us that God was with him: "The LORD was with Joseph so that he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master. When his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD gave him success in everything he did, Joseph found favor in his eyes and became his attendant."

As Joseph entered prison, Genesis 39:21-22 tells us that God went with him there too: "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."

God had never left Joseph. In fact, God was carefully orchestrating Joseph's career at every phase.

Throughout Genesis, and the rest of the Bible, God gives an interpretation of life that has him at the centre, working out his sovereign plan of redemption, that he is close and involved. When things get difficult or when we can't make sense of our circumstances, we are in danger of mistakenly believing that God isn't really involved, that he's left us.

When we read Genesis, or any other part of the Bible, it helps us interpret life the right way. God wants us to know that he is very much involved in the details of our lives – that he has never left us. He wants us to interpret both the beauty and the brokenness of our lives from his perspective. God wants us to see that our life only makes sense when understood from his perspective within his plan. God wants us to know, even if we can't see it, that he is intimately involved in the flow of our lives.

When life seems to be going so wrong, as it must have for Joseph, it can be difficult to believe in God's sovereignty. But God doesn't promise to shield us from every evil. Instead, he wants us to faithfully believe that he is able to accomplish good through it.

Commentator John Walton says, "God sustains a cosmos that temporarily accommodates the presence of evil. He grants evil a certain latitude with the sovereign confidence that even when it does its worst, he can outflank it."²

The story of Joseph in Genesis is really the story of God predestining a future rescue, intervening in human affairs to bring about his purposes. God does so by using dreams to reveal the future and position his servant to be at a strategic place.

² Genesis, The NIV Commentary, pg. 700

Let's begin reading the story...

Genesis 40:1-3, 6-8

1 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, 3 and put them in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, in the same prison where Joseph was confined....

6 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 do you look 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."

So Joseph first listens to the cupbearer's dream, and receiving an interpretation from God, shares it's meaning. Like a lot of biblical dreams, the cupbearer's dream was filled with symbolic imagery – in this case the imagery of a vine, which makes sense because the cupbearer is someone who served the king's wine. Joseph tells him that the dream is saying that in three days his position to the royal court will be restored.

Joseph then begs the cupbearer to remember to tell Pharaoh about his innocence when he is restored to Pharaoh's court.

Genesis 40:14-15

14 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 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.

The chief baker then eagerly shares his dream. The baker's dream is about a food basket being carried on his head, where birds come to eat away at the food. Again, Joseph receives an interpretation and shares the meaning of the dream. Joseph tells the baker that in three

days, the baker will lose his head. Three days later everything happens just as Joseph had interpreted.

Now, much could be said about the nature of dreams. We don't have time to say too much. But let me mention a few things about dreams. First, not all dreams are of God – in fact, I would say that most aren't. I think most dreams originate out of our own thoughts, as we mentally digest our day in our sleep. I've heard dreams described as our brain working through the process of defragmenting memories, like a computer harddrive re-organizing itself. Most dreams are fragments of the day, random and mixed up.

Then there are dreams that come from the enemy as a form of demonic attack. On several occasions, I have been awoken by a demonic dream where the enemy was trying to scare me or threaten me through a nightmare. It's an intimidation tactic. I quickly pray that Jesus would come and give me his thoughts and guard my heart against whatever was presenting itself.

And then some dreams are from God. Throughout scripture, God communicates to people through dreams that are often highly symbolic and not always immediately understood. Dreams sometimes require us to seek God for their meaning. I'm convinced that one of the reasons God speaks to us in this way is to try to get our attention that we would actively seek him more.

When God brings a dream to someone, it is to prepare them and to get them aligned with him in some way, as God did with Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Daniel, Jesus' earthly father, Joseph, and so many others.

It's also one of the ways God gets through to our hearts when we're too busy to listen to him. As Jim Goll says, "God wants to speak to us, but often during the day He can hardly get a word in edgewise. When we are asleep, however, our souls become more rested and more inclined to receive from Him. Then He can open our ears and give us

instructions on various levels.”³

My purpose is not to try to attempt to fully explain the phenomenon of dreams. My point is simply to say that dreams are one way God communicates with us. Our deistic tendency is to think dreams are never anything more than last night's pizza. If we interpret every dream that way, we are going to miss something God wants to show us.

After interpreting the cupbearer's dream, Joseph pleaded with him to take his cause of being released to Pharaoh. But chapter 40 ends by saying, “23 The chief cupbearer, however, did not remember Joseph; he forgot him.”

Joseph ends up forgotten, not by God, but by the very person he was counting on would get him out of this mess. Joseph is desperate for someone to see his innocence and get him released from prison. Well, God has a plan to get Joseph out of prison, but God's timing involves waiting another two years.

God's timetable is so different from our own. It's hard to keep trusting God with your life when he just isn't coming through when you feel he should. I'm sure Joseph must have felt that way. Joseph understood that God is in control as God supplied answers to each dream, and yet he was desperate to find a way out of God's plan to use him while in prison.

In my reading this week, one commentator compares experiencing God's sovereignty to being a bad chess player competing against the computer. When I first got me computer, I played the free chess game that came with it. But I quickly realized it was always going to win. Thankfully, God's not just out to win. When his plans win, ultimately we win.

As God directs our life, he is driven by love and compassion. Like

³ Jim Goll, *The Seer*, pg. 119

playing the computer, God puts me in positions where I have to respond with certain moves. Like the computer, God doesn't make my choices, but he sometimes limits them or forces my hand. Every move I make seems to inevitably lead to God's strategy and ultimate victory in the situation. In life, we get to make our own moves, but God's mastery is complete.

Genesis 41:1- 7

1 When two full years had passed, Pharaoh had a dream: He was standing by the Nile, 2 when out of the river there came up seven cows, sleek and fat, and they grazed among the reeds. 3 After them, seven other cows, ugly and gaunt, came up out of the Nile and stood beside those on the riverbank. 4 And the cows that were ugly and gaunt ate up the seven sleek, fat cows. Then Pharaoh woke up.

5 He fell asleep again and had a second dream: Seven heads of grain, healthy and good, were growing on a single stalk. 6 After them, seven other heads of grain sprouted—thin and scorched by the east wind. 7 The thin heads of grain swallowed up the seven healthy, full heads. Then Pharaoh woke up; it had been a dream.

The passage goes on to say that Pharaoh's mind was deeply troubled by the dream God had brought to him and that he did not understand it. Hearing about Pharaoh's dream, the cupbearer tells Pharaoh the story of Joseph interpreting his dream, so Pharaoh sends for Joseph.

Only Joseph makes it clear that he is not the one who has the interpretation, but it is God:

Genesis 41:16, 25-32

16 “I cannot do it,” Joseph replied to Pharaoh, “but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires.”

Despite all that he has gone through, Joseph understands that God is the one who has the answers. Joseph has incredible God-confidence, even if he doesn't understand God's plans for his own life.

25 Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, “The dreams of Pharaoh are one and

the same. God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do. 26 The seven good cows are seven years, and the seven good heads of grain are seven years; it is one and the same dream. 27 The seven lean, ugly cows that came up afterward are seven years, and so are the seven worthless heads of grain scorched by the east wind: They are seven years of famine.”

28 “It is just as I said to Pharaoh: God has shown Pharaoh what he is about to do. 29 Seven years of great abundance are coming throughout the land of Egypt, 30 but seven years of famine will follow them. Then all the abundance in Egypt will be forgotten, and the famine will ravage the land. 31 The abundance in the land will not be remembered, because the famine that follows it will be so severe. 32 The reason the dream was given to Pharaoh in two forms is that the matter has been firmly decided by God, and God will do it soon.”

God made it clear that he was not going to prevent the severe famine that was coming, but God would prepare Egypt for it as a means of providing for not only Joseph, but his 11 brothers, and father, Jacob.

Joseph goes on to tell Pharaoh God’s plan for the coming seasons of abundance and famine. Through Joseph, God instructs Pharaoh to appoint someone to carefully store up grain during the abundance for the time of famine.

Genesis 41: 39-40

39 Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. 40 You shall be in charge of my palace, and all my people are to submit to your orders. Only with respect to the throne will I be greater than you.”

Joseph likely wouldn’t have guessed the way Pharaoh’s dream would fulfill the dream God had given Joseph at 17, 13 years earlier.

God hasn’t set the world in motion and left it to run itself. God speaks in human history. He reveals, He makes Himself known, He warns, He guides and directs.

God saved countless lives by letting Pharaoh in on what was about to take place. And in the process, the God of Creation made Himself known in a land that was riddled with idols and false gods.

Genesis 41:56-57

56 When the famine had spread over the whole country, Joseph opened all the storehouses and sold grain to the Egyptians, for the famine was severe throughout Egypt. 57 And all the world came to Egypt to buy grain from Joseph, because the famine was severe everywhere.

In mysterious ways, God breaks into history and weaves our lives around his plan to bless and redeem the lives of people, using our lives in the process.

Every day, you and I need to interpret life from the perspective that God has been guiding and directing our lives according to his grand purposes.

So often, we are tempted to think that God is in our lives to in order to serve us. In his book *Soul Searching*, Chris Smith talks about the way many North Americans have adopted that kind of approach to Christianity. Smith calls it, “Moral Therapeutic Deism.” He breaks down what he means. “Moral” being the thought that “I’m going to heaven because I’m good.” “Therapeutic,” meaning, “My purpose in life is to be happy and fulfilled and satisfied.” And “Deism” meaning, “God isn’t a part of my day but somebody I bring in when I have a need.”⁴

Now, it’s true that in Jesus, God has come to meet my needs, especially the big ones, like forgiveness through the cross, the gift of his Spirit living in me, and the promise of eternal life. But God has called me to also lay down my life for him and his purposes. To interpret my life according to the cross, where Jesus

⁴ [Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers](#). Oxford University Press, 2005

himself had to endure suffering and pain for God's plan of salvation to be realized. Jesus interpreted the direction, the timing, and the suffering in his life, according to the purpose God had for his life. Jesus' obedience to the Father's will became the blessing of salvation ultimately promised to Abraham and his decedents.

In Luke 9, Jesus spoke about his surrender to the path God had chosen for him as he said, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life."

23 Then he said to them all: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. **24** For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it.

In laying down his life for us, Jesus is inviting you to lay down your life for him. While God loves us incredibly, he is not here to only serve you. His plan is to bless the whole earth, using you, and blessing you in the process. He is not primarily here for you. You are here for him. But when God wins, you end up winning too.

Surrender to God's plans. Choose to live for his purposes and to interpret life through the lens of the cross. We must always interpret our lives through the lens of what Jesus did on the cross, choosing to give up his life for ours. And in turn, we choosing to give up our life for him.

James 1:2-5

2 Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters,**[a]** whenever you face trials of many kinds, **3** because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. **4** Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. **5** If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.