

Prison Bake
Genesis 40

You know friends – I can't speak from personal experience – but from what I've seen and read prisoners can form a special sort of bond from doing hard time together in prison, and when one gets released they are honor bound to keep any promises they made to their former inmate, once they transitioned to the outside.

Maybe it's something noble - like promising to keep a watchful eye on their inmate's family, to protect them or provide for them.

Maybe it's something vengeful - like promising to go and settle a score against an enemy, or personal - like making sure their share of the loot from a robbery is waiting for them.

Or perhaps it's more of a legal matter – like in the case of Joseph; who asked the King's Cupbearer to plead his case before Pharaoh when the Cupbearer was released.

At any rate – among those who have done time together – if you make a promise to someone when you're on the inside – you are honor bound to keep it when you get on the outside.

And it's not the sort of thing you forget either – not in the absent minded sort of way you that one forgets to pick-up toothpaste or milk when you are grocery shopping.

The only way to forget the experience of having a desperate man look you in the eyes, with all sincerity and plead with you, telling you that he's been locked up for a crime he did not commit... the only way to forget that is to deliberately put off doing anything about it, whenever it comes to mind.

And over time – gradually you begin to forget about it.

So once the Cupbearer had been released and restored to his position in Pharaoh's court - for whatever reason - he neglected to take action and bring Joseph's case before Pharaoh, and so this chapter in the story of Joseph ends with

those discouraging words *“The chief cupbearer, however, did not remember Joseph; he forgot him.”* (Gen 40:23)

And once again it appears that Joseph can't catch a break; that he can't win for losing... as he himself says *“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.”* (Gen 40:15)

And just when it seems that Joseph might catch a break for a favor done for a powerful political figure... who just happened across his path – that hope gradually fades as each days passes with no news coming from the outside.

And friends I think you'll agree that's the most difficult and painful way to lose hope, isn't it?

To start out having seen something that you're pretty confident has the fingerprints of God all over it... like having a couple of powerful political prisoner's be assigned to you, and to be given interpretations to their dreams...

And you can see God working in this because you're starting to get the hang of understanding how God works in mysterious ways and all... like even though you've been thrown into prison, you've been given the top job in the prison and you're treated well and so on...

So it's not like you haven't seen or experienced God's provision for you up to this point – like being spared from having your brothers kill you, and selling you instead – and being sold to Potiphar who puts you in charge of his whole estate...

and so you step out in faith and hang your hat on what you believe God is going to do and then you wait for Him to show up...

So Joseph takes a step and asks the Cupbearer to bring his case before Pharaoh when God show Joseph that the Cupbearer will be restored to his official position in three days.

And then you wait, as Joseph must have - and you wait... and you wait... and you continue waiting, but nothing happens and you start to question your faith, you wonder what's going on - why isn't God working through this?

And you begin to lose hope.

But then you think back to what God has done in the past. You remember the ways in which it seemed so obvious to you now that this latest incident was arranged by God and your hope springs back to life – rekindled - and you think maybe tomorrow!

And so the morning comes and tomorrow becomes today, then it turns into yesterday and still nothing has happened – and this goes on and on – day after day and it is the most difficult way to lose hope and causes us to doubt our faith – because it's a long slow painful dying.

And friends – if any of you are going through circumstances such as these, this morning I want to tell you that God has not

forgotten you, not to rekindle your hope so that it can be snuffed out again, but to keep those embers alive and glowing until such a time that God has determined to act on your faith.

So I want you to hold on to this word from the scriptures – to help you endure, and persevere for however long it is that God will have to wait.

It's from Isaiah 49:15-16 *“Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands!”*

And friends – the definitive proof that God has not forgotten us is in the action He **has** taken – so, while you are waiting for him to act in whatever it is that you have stepped out and claimed from Him in faith – remember that He has acted, and accomplished the ultimate act of deliverance by becoming one of us in Jesus Christ and fulfilling and establishing the covenant on the cross.

I find no better way to understand and be reminded that God has engraved us on the palms of his hands than to think of the marks left by the nails which held him on the cross – dying there to pay for each and every one of our acts of covenant unfaithfulness.

So whenever you are despairing friends – as you wait for God to act in circumstances that you believed He would act in – remember that He has not forgotten you – He has taken action in Jesus Christ – that is the proof you need and the encouragement you need to continue waiting.

And what's more friends - our Lord Jesus knows what it is like to feel forgotten.

When He became Sin on the cross - as the scriptures reveal that *“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21)*- God had to turn away from Him, to turn his back on Him, and Christ went through Hell in this moment as the Father removed all our sins from his presence, and forgot them.

Jesus knows what it means to be truly forgotten – thus he cried out on the cross – *“My God my God why has thou forsaken me!” (Mat 27:46)*

Now, to say that Christ has experienced the rejection of His Father is not a platitude or a sentimental cliché to make us feel better, knowing that Christ can sympathize and relate to us – though it may have that sort of effect.

That Christ has gone through this rejection gives us comfort in the fact that it shows our Lord will not send us somewhere that He has not already gone before us; He will not put us through something He has not already redeemed.

So, this not only speaks to the noble character of our Lord, but it especially highlights his redemptive power.

To be able to take this experience of being forgotten by God and turn it into an instrument which he is able to use to for his ultimate plans and purposes for our life – well... truly Jesus is LORD of ALL – including the experiencing of being forgotten.

And so the time Joseph spends waiting for God to do something through the Cupbearer, when the Cupbearer has forgotten him is not wasted time, it is a time of testing, refining and shaping and preparation for what God purposes to do next.

Joseph is not wrong in seeing God's fingerprints all over these circumstances, He is not mistaken that these two men have crossed his path because of divine appointment, and he's right to be so absolutely confident that he's seen God at work that he says to them "tell me your dreams – God will give me the interpretation" with the expectation that in a very short time this will become the catalyst through which God will act for him.

What Joseph is going to discover is that God will act for him – in his own time! Because what God has next for Joseph is more about forwarding God's plans to put things in place so that it's clearly evident that God alone has fulfilled the promise to Abraham.

What God has next is more God than it is about Joseph.

You see friends – a major growth point in our discipleship and our life as followers of Christ is when we can shift from saying "What can Jesus do for me?" to "what is Jesus doing to me so that I can serve Him?"

So, up to this point we've been focusing on how Joseph has been presented as a man of integrity and exceptional character and how that points us to the righteousness of Christ.

But at this point in the story I'm going to shift that focus a bit. The fact is that Joseph was human and thus, while he is portrayed as having exemplary character, in truth he is sinful like the rest of us.

So, we have to admit that the way everything seems to revolve around Joseph – his dreams, his promotions, how God favored and blessed him regardless of where he was and so

on... all that attention can easily lead Joseph to believe everything is all about Him – even God’s plans.

And friends that is a real danger for any one of us as well, especially in an individualistic consumeristic culture where we are always looking for the best deal, for where **we** will receive the best value, the most return on **our** investment...

We are always worried about protecting our rights and freedoms, if we want to motivate people to action we have to show them what’s in it for them, and when it comes to our relationship with God – we’re told that God loves us... and he died for us... and He wants to bless us...

All of which is true – but it can easily turn into a Christian heresy – a one-sided application of the truth.

Yes God loves us, He died for us, He wants to bless us – in order to bring His Kingdom to His creation, and have us become His people who do His will.

And the only way to really identify and call out that self-interested focus, which our sin and our humanistic culture develops in us, is to put us through that experience of abandonment.

Nothing says “it’s not about you” more than God keeping us waiting for Him to act in His good time and pleasure.

There’s really no other way to shift our focus. Because at this point, continuing to pay attention to us, responding to our every whim and desire - even if they are legitimate or godly whims and desires - only reinforces the notion that everything is all about us.

Do you see what I’m getting at? Friends, at some point, God has to break that in each one of us or we will end up relating to God more like a Genie than the One who commands our life.

What God has planned to do with Joseph is about God – not Joseph, and so God in his mysterious ways, prevents the

Cupbearer from fulfilling his promise to Joseph until God deems it is time to act, but that's for next week's message.

Today, we just need to look at what it means to go through those times where God withdraws, and makes us wait for Him to act - so that we begin to understand what it means that we must decrease and Christ must increase, and we are prepared to participate in **God's** plans as a result of that. (John 3:30)

And the dreams of the baker and cupbearer illustrate this for us.

For as much as Joseph received the correct interpretation from God that in three days one prisoner would be released to be restored, and the other prisoner would be released to be executed... I wonder if he missed seeing something else God wanted to show him?

Like the fact that in the dream of the baker there is no process represented that leads to restoration or life.

The baker is simply carrying three baskets on his head filled with baked goods, and the birds are eating out of the top basket.

And compared to the dream of the cupbearer, the baker does not see the wheat grow up, get harvested, be milled into flour, kneaded into dough, baked in the oven in the same way that the Cupbearer sees vines growing, blossoms forming, grapes ripening, and being squeezed into wine and so on...

The absence of any sort of process in the Baker's dream, and the immediacy with which the baked goods were available can speak to our self-centered focus, which assumes things must happen right away and according to our timeline.

And it also brings to mind Jesus' words that we do not live by bread alone! (Matt 4:4)

Conversely, in the Cupbearer's dream – there is a process that is observed, and though in the dream it occurs in fast-forward – the point is that there is a process to produce good wine -

especially wine fit for a king – and this process takes much longer than it does to make baked goods.

I believe that God included the process in the Cupbearers dream in order to tell Joseph, and us, that what Joseph expected God to do in this situation, where he had brought this powerful political figure across Joseph's path - will proceed according to God's process and timing.

And the longer that takes the better the result will be in the end, because good quality wine is impossible to make without the passage of time, and the longer the wine sits the better it gets.

So God needed to let Joseph sit for a while longer in order to bring him through the process which change his perspective to see that things are about God and not about him – to ferment him and age him as it were.

Please understand friends – this is not punishment, this is not to suggest to anyone who is experiencing this right now that

you need to hurry up and change, that you have to “make things about God” in your life instead of yourself and as soon as you've learned your lesson - and then you'll be released from your circumstances.

Friends, we can't make ourselves change from self-focused to God-focused any more than grape juice can will itself to ferment faster than the natural process allows.

God himself in His good time will determine what sort of vintage He is aging you to become. God himself will determine how long that needs to take, and the kinds of circumstances he will have you endure to ferment you.

Because friends, God is maturing us into a high quality vintage – and we are to be served up and tasted by our Lord and King, to give him pleasure and joy and gladden his heart. It's about God - not about us.

And friends – if you are going through circumstances like this right now... and if you aren't, pay attention - so that you are

prepared for when you do go through things that shift your focus from yourself to God...

If you are going through this right now, if you are waiting in faith for God to act on something... and struggling with waiting, and fighting doubts of feeling like He has forgotten you...

You need to be reminded that in God's divine work of bringing the baker and the cupbearer across Joseph's path – He points us to the means by which we remember God's ultimate action for us – to nurture and sustain our faith until God determines to fulfill his plans for us.

Friends the baker and the cupbearer point us to the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper and are physical, tangible elements – things which we can touch, taste, smell and feel – to nourish our faith that through the power of the Holy Spirit – Christ and the Father are with us – even when they are keeping us waiting at their good pleasure.

Perhaps this is why the Apostle Paul told us *“For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.”* (2 Cor 11:26)

So when we eat and drink we remind ourselves that though God should keep us waiting in whatever circumstances we are in – we can renew our hope, endure the waiting and cooperate with Spirit's work in us because God has already acted decisively for us, in the most profound manner possible through Jesus Christ his death.

Thus any experience of the absence of God does not mean that we are forgotten – but that we are being shifted from self-focus to God focused, as it says in Colossians 3:3 *“For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.”*

So Lord, let me sit in the barrel a while longer and age and mature so that you bring out all my flavors and bouquets and you will receive the most amount of enjoyment from who you are making me to be. Because it's all about you Lord – it's not about me - Amen