

When You Can't See God

Pastor Chris Baker // 10.07.18 // Centralia FBC

Intro

Willard Duncan Vandiver led an interesting life. Before he grew the fantastic mustache and wild shock of white hair you see in the picture on the screen, he moved with his family from West Virginia right here to Boone County, MO. His parents farmed in Boone County in the 1850s while Willard was just a young boy. Sometime later in his childhood they moved to Fayette, where Willard later attended Central College (now Central Methodist University). He was a successful student. He studied law and went on to become a professor and later president at Missouri State Normal College (now SEMO), in Cape Girardeau.

In 1896 he was elected to the U.S. Congress and it was while serving there that that he made an off-hand remark during a political speech that left a legacy that would long outlive him.

Accounts vary, but Vandiver is quoted as once saying during either a political debate or a speech, "I am from a state that raises corn and cotton and cockleburs and Democrats, and frothy eloquence neither convinces nor satisfies me. I am from Missouri. You have got to show me."¹

The quip was a memorable one. So much so that the state now carries it as a nickname. Even though Vandiver probably isn't the first one to make the statement, he's credited with bringing it to popularity.

My question this morning is what do we here in the Show-Me State do when God seems to be absent? Most of us don't raise corn or cotton and I don't know why anyone in their right mind would raise cockleburs. . . but we are still a people who want to see tangible proof of the things we believe. We want God to show us His faithfulness. We sang earlier about our strength rising as we wait upon the Lord to demonstrate that faithfulness.

The problem in the text we are going to read this morning is that it doesn't appear as though God is very present. In fact, we have seen Joseph treated very unfairly in two different

¹ <https://semo.edu/president/history/vandiver.html>

settings now. First, by his brothers who stripped him, abused him, and tossed him into an empty cistern before selling him as a slave. Then by Potiphar and his wife as she accused him of assaulting her and Potiphar believed her and had him thrown in prison. But at least in chapter 39 we had a comforting refrain—God was with Joseph. In the darkest moments we had the reminder that God was with Joseph.

Chapter 40 doesn't offer us that assurance—at least not on the surface. If you were to look at chapter 40 and say “show me” the evidence that God's providence is working all things for good in Joseph's life—that would be tough after a first read through. You could read this chapter and ask, ‘where is God's faithfulness?’

There's a theme in this story we have touched on at least a little bit every week and that is that God, not Joseph, is the main character of the story. And if we believe that, it makes God's apparent absence in this chapter even more unsettling. The external circumstances of Joseph's life change little from Genesis 40:1 to 40:23. At the beginning of the chapter, Joseph is alone and in prison. At the end of the chapter, Joseph is alone—now forgotten by someone who was supposed to help him—and in prison.

So what are we to think of this God—the main character, the driving force behind this story—and His treatment of Joseph so far? This is where “show me” isn't enough. Because if we limit ourselves to a God we can see, our God is too small. ***If we limit ourselves to a God we can see, our God is too small.***

Genesis 40 is a story of faithfulness in the midst of apparent silence. Of God's hand of providence working even when He seems to be absent.

Genesis 37-50 tells us the story of Joseph's life but what it's really about is ***how God acts in the lives of real people through His divine providence to secure His divine promises as He works to bless all the nations of the earth by rescuing a people from their sin for His glory.***

God's providence secures His promises. What do I mean by God's providence? ***God's actions in creation to advance His purpose.***

God's providence is all over this story. But He works in ways that could be easy for us to miss and Joseph responds in such a way that I think we can see he trusted in God's faithfulness even though he didn't fully understand what God was doing.

To really understand chapter 40, what it sets up for the rest of Joseph's story, and how these things matter for you and I today I want us to examine this text in light of three things: Joseph's faithfulness to a God who seems absent, God's faithfulness to Joseph, though He seems absent, and God's faithfulness to the nations through His quiet movements in Joseph's life.

Let's read Genesis 40:1-23 together:

After this, the king of Egypt's cupbearer and baker offended their master, the king of Egypt. 2 Pharaoh was angry with his two officers, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker, 3 and put them in custody in the house of the captain of the guards in the prison where Joseph was confined. 4 The captain of the guards assigned Joseph to them as their personal attendant, and they were in custody for some time.

5 The king of Egypt's cupbearer and baker, who were confined in the prison, each had a dream. Both had a dream on the same night, and each dream had its own meaning.

6 When Joseph came to them in the morning, he saw that they looked distraught. 7 So he asked Pharaoh's officers who were in custody with him in his master's house, "Why do you look so sad today?"

8 "We had dreams," they said to him, "but there is no one to interpret them." Then Joseph said to them, "Don't interpretations belong to God? Tell me your dreams."

9 So the chief cupbearer told his dream to Joseph: "In my dream there was a vine in front of me. 10 On the vine were three branches. As soon as it budded, its blossoms came out 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 placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand."

12 "This is its interpretation," Joseph said to him. "The three branches are three days.

13 In just three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your position. You will put Pharaoh's cup in his hand the way you used to when you were his cupbearer. 14 But when all goes well for you, remember that I was with you. Please show kindness to me by mentioning me to Pharaoh, and get me out of this prison.

15 For I was kidnapped from the land of the Hebrews, and even here I have done nothing that they should put me in the dungeon.”

16 When the chief baker saw that the interpretation was positive, he said to Joseph, “I also had a dream. Three baskets of white bread were on my head. 17 In the top basket were all sorts of baked goods for Pharaoh, but the birds were eating them out of the basket on my head.”

18 “This is its interpretation,” Joseph replied. “The three baskets are three days. 19 In just three days Pharaoh will lift up your head—from off you—and hang you on a tree. Then the birds will eat the flesh from your body.”

20 On the third day, which was Pharaoh’s birthday, he gave a feast for all his servants. He elevated the chief cupbearer and the chief baker among his servants. 21 Pharaoh restored the chief cupbearer to his position as cupbearer, and he placed the cup in Pharaoh’s hand. 22 But Pharaoh hanged the chief baker, just as Joseph had explained to them. 23 Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph; he forgot him.

Joseph’s Faithfulness When God Seems Distant

The prison phase of Joseph’s life started off remarkably similarly to the period where he was a slave in Potiphar’s house. The end of chapter 39 tells us the warden put all the prisoners under Joseph’s authority and that he fully trusted Joseph. We talked last week about the importance of the refrain of chapter 39—God was with Joseph. That chapter closed by telling us that God made everything that Joseph did successful.

That success may have plateaued, though, because when chapter 40 opens Joseph is still in prison. This was not an easy period in Joseph’s life. Even though he was elevated to the position of trustee or something like it, his circumstances in prison would not have been easy.

Yet, it’s clear that he remained faithful to the Lord and His promises in Joseph’s life. Remember back in chapter 37, God gave Joseph a pair of dreams in which he was lifted up and it seems—based on his conduct for the remainder of the story—that Joseph clung to those promises from God.

He would have had a myriad of reasons to abandon hope. When God falls silent, or His providence directs our lives in a way we don’t understand, it’s natural for us to ask why.

Why, God, did you allow this hurt into my life? Why, God did you allow this hard circumstance to happen?

Think about the whys Joseph could have asked. Why did you allow my brothers to hate me so much they wouldn't even speak to me? Why did you allow dad to show favoritism that drove them to such a jealous hatred they wanted to kill me? Why did you allow them to beat me, strip me, and leave me for dead? Why did I get sold as a slave? Why did you send me into that household where I was tempted toward illicit sex? Why did you allow me to be falsely accused? Why am I rotting here in this Egyptian prison cell with no prospect for freedom?

There are some really big 'whys' sitting in this room today. And when you ask God your really big why questions, you feel like the only answer you're hearing is silence. And that may actually be true. . .but I hope you'll find by the end of this sermon that silence from God isn't bad and I know we can see from Joseph's life that silence from God wasn't an excuse to stop being faithful.

This is the first of two false beliefs this chapter lays bare. It's the idea that God's goodness in our lives is based on our performance.

Joseph was faithful to God's promises in his life even though he had dozens of excuses not to be. Joseph must have understood a hard truth that I hope this text causes us all to wrestle with today. **God's favor is not tied to life's circumstances.** If you have a flat tire, that doesn't mean God is mad at you. Yet, so often we tend to view our circumstances as a commentary on God's view of who we are as a person. Or we think that if we are good, God will improve our circumstances. I love what Jerry Bridges wrote in *The Discipline of Grace* **Your worst days are never so bad that you are beyond the reach of God's grace. And your best days are never so good that you are beyond the need of God's grace.**²

We don't have to read far into the text to see that Joseph's character—how he related to God and the people around him everyday—was not destroyed by his circumstances. In the first eight verses we learn about Joseph's faithfulness to God through his character and his speech.

² Bridges, Gerald; Jerry Bridges. *The Discipline of Grace: God's Role and Our Role in the Pursuit of Holiness* (p. 19). NAVPress - A. Kindle Edition.

In verses 1-5 two government officials run afoul of Pharaoh. The chief cupbearer and the chief baker. Now, I concede those may not sound like the highest of government offices. In fact, I think baker doesn't sound like a very important office at all. But these would have been high ranking men with large staffs of underlings and their responsibility would be to ensure that the food and drink that came to Pharaoh was safe—untainted by a political, or family, or national rival. These would have been very important men. And based on the word used in verse 1 it seems their offense was legitimate. Unlike Joseph, they are not innocent.

And when they are thrown into prison—because they're important officials—they're assigned a personal attendant by the captain of the guards. We've already met a man who holds that very same title back in the last chapter. Back in verse 39:1 we learn Joseph and been sold to Potiphar, who was an officer of Pharaoh and the captain of the guards. We're not specifically told that Potiphar still hold this office in chapter 40, but it is reasonable to think so.

It reveals a great deal about Joseph's character and work ethic that Potiphar would choose Joseph to hold this important role after what they'd been through together. Joseph's faithfulness to God is demonstrated in his moral character over and over again in this story. He's held up as the opposite of all the morally corrupt people surrounding him—from his father who played favorites, to his homicidal brothers, to adulterous Judah and Tamar and Potiphar's wife. Joseph is the photo negative to the corruption of the other characters in this narrative.

Now, what I don't want us to do is to only look at Joseph's actions in all these situations and reduce this to story about morals—because it is much, much more than that. If we reduce Scripture to tales of moral dos and don'ts, then we no longer have Scripture. This isn't Aesop's fables for Christians. We're looking at God working something much bigger than a morality play here, not just in the life of Joseph but in all the nations of the earth.

But at the same time, we don't want to miss that Joseph's faithfulness to God is displayed in his moral character. Potiphar still saw in Joseph a character that was different from those around him, causing him to stand out from the rest of the people we've seen so far. The warden sees it as well, which is why he has this position of authority in the prison to begin with. God's people should be marked by a character—the way we treat God and His creation—that is vastly different from those around us.

And we see in Joseph's life that his character put him in a situation where he had the opportunity to point those around him to his God. Look at verse 6:

6 When Joseph came to them in the morning, he saw that they looked distraught. 7 So he asked Pharaoh's officers who were in custody with him in his master's house, "Why do you look so sad today?"

8 "We had dreams," they said to him, "but there is no one to interpret them."

Joseph did something revolutionary here. He asked how someone was doing and actually waited for the answer. I know it sounds insane, but I think we should give it a go.

In all seriousness, notice that as Joseph was going about his regular, daily routine he paused long enough to take a genuine interest in the people his job put him in relationship with. And then he's going to steer the conversation toward his God.

These two men had some form of contact with one another and they both had a dream on the same night. In Egyptian culture dreams were a big deal because it was generally believed that dreams put you in contact with the afterlife.³ The interpretation of dreams was its own enterprise. There would be professional interpreters who kept books of dreams and their interpretations. But these two prisoners wouldn't have had access to those professionals.

Then along comes Joseph. If you look at the last part of verse 8, he says

"Don't interpretations belong to God? Tell me your dreams."

Not only did Joseph demonstrate faithfulness to God through his character but also through his words. These men wanted some sort of divine wisdom from their pagan society and Joseph says, hey these unknown truths they belong to my God, the one, true God. They don't come from a horoscope, they don't come from a fortune cookie, my God holds the future. Joseph seized the opportunity to speak God's truth during his own moment of crisis when he's been unjustly imprisoned.

Here's the second false belief this chapter helps us to combat. Some think that because God is sovereign—because He's working in His providence to accomplish His purpose—we

³ Hughes, R. Kent. Genesis: Beginning and Blessing (Preaching the Word) (p. 469). Crossway. Kindle Edition.

don't need to do anything. What's the point? God's going to work it out anyway. Here's a simple problem with that line of thinking: If you were in a room with everyone in Scripture who worshiped God and you held that view, you'd be the only one.

God's sovereignty does not render man's responsibility null and void. Instead, over and over again Scripture shows us how God uses the obedience of His people to accomplish His purposes. That's what we see here.

Joseph tells them both Pharaoh will lift up their head, an expression that meant to be called before the king. The cupbearer would be restored and the baker would be executed. But Joseph makes an appeal to the cupbearer. He asks that when he's restored, he'll remember Joseph and free him because—after all—Joseph hasn't done anything to deserve to be in prison.

Events play out exactly as he said they would and it looks like there might just be some hope for Joseph. Yet, the chapter ends on a depressing note: *23 Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph; he forgot him.*

It doesn't seem like chapter 39 accomplished anything! Joseph started out as a prisoner with no hope of pardon. It ends with Joseph, a prisoner with no hope of pardon who had been given false hope that he might be freed! Emotionally, he's worse off in verse 23 than he was in verse 1. Joseph has proved his faithfulness by his character and by his words, but on the surface it seems as though he has been forgotten by not just the cupbearer, but by God himself. The refrain of chapter 39—God was with Joseph—is absent in chapter 40. Does that mean God has taken his hand off Joseph? Absolutely not.

I shared this quote with you last week, but I want you to see it again because it's so helpful: ***God is often absent in the ways we most desire, but present in the way we most require.*** (David Bowden)⁴

While it may seem on the surface level that God is less present in chapter 40 than in chapter 39, that is no where near true. We've seen Joseph's faithfulness to God in prison, let's now see how God remains faithful to Joseph even though He seems silent.

God's Faithfulness to Joseph in Ways Joseph Can't See

⁴ <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/when-god-isnt-there>

There are at least four ways in this chapter we see God's providence at work in ways that we can see since we get to see the story in its entirety. That's not a luxury we have for our own lives, but God is no less sovereign over ours than he was over Joseph's. I like to think of it this way: God can see both ends of the train. I grew up in East Tennessee, where we had a lot of hills, forests, mountains, and things like that. If you saw a train, at most, you'd see a few cars as they went by but there was never a long enough stretch of the tracks visible for you to see the whole train. Then when I was 26 we moved to Iowa. And they don't have any of those geographical features. And for the first time in my life, I was able to see a whole train. I thought it was pretty cool. I could see the engine all the way back to the last car. We never get that view of our own lives, but since we see that in Joseph's life we can see at least four ways that God was at work in the circumstances of this very chapter. I'll go through them quickly:

1. The location. We see that the prison Joseph was sent to in Genesis 39 was the king's prison. So when Pharaoh sends these two officials away in chapter 40 they end up in the very same location as Joseph. Had Joseph been sent to a different prison he would have never crossed paths with the cupbearer.
2. We looked at it briefly as a component of Joseph's faithfulness, but had Potiphar never purchased Joseph as a slave in the first place then Joseph would have never proven his worth as a servant in his household and he would not have been assigned to the cupbearer and the baker. God's hand was guiding these seemingly random events of Joseph's life for a much greater purpose.
3. God was active in the lives of these officials. Remember, the human side of this whole epic was set in motion by sin. The sin of favoritism on the part of Jacob, perhaps the pride of Joseph, and the hatred of his brothers. Just as God worked in those sins, a fact Joseph grows to understand because he will later say to his brothers in Genesis 50:20 **You planned evil against me; God planned it for good to bring about the present result-the survival of many people.** Just as God redeemed the sin of Joseph's brothers for good, whatever evil plot landed the baker and the cupbearer in prison was ordained by God for His good purpose. Remember the promise of Romans 8:28 ***We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God: those who are called according to His purpose.***
4. God's providence caused Joseph to be forgotten. This one is tougher for us to come to grips with, but the cupbearer forgetting Joseph was an act of God's providence. And though it would have caused Joseph great heartache and distress it won't be long until

we can clearly see in the text why God would have Joseph wait. He will eventually be released directly by Pharaoh himself and made an high-ranking official in Pharaoh's government. Had the cupbearer released him, that probably never happens and Joseph would have probably starved to death in the famine that was to come.

One of the most difficult commands God will ever give His children is a single word: wait. But it's always for our good and His glory. I can't even imagine how hard this waiting would have been for Joseph. John Calvin's words might help us come to grips with God's actions here:

"Thus, when God might have delivered the holy man directly from prison, he chose to lead him around by circuitous paths. The better to prove his patience and to manifest by the mode of his deliverance that he has wonderful methods of working hidden from our view. He does this that we may learn not to measure by our own sense, the salvation which He has promised us."⁵

Speaking of that salvation, there is one more way God demonstrates his faithfulness here that I want us to notice this morning.

God's faithfulness to all His people in imaging Christ in Joseph's life

We've seen already in our study that Joseph's life provides us an image of the savior to come. Joseph will be the one to save both his family and the entire nation of Egypt by the end of Genesis. But he can only save them from starvation. He's an imperfect savior because he has no power over sin and death. But his life offers us a glimpse of the savior who Genesis 3:15 promised would crush the head of sin and death once and for all. The same savior God promised would be a blessing to all the nations of the earth in Genesis 12.

The gospel itself is pictured in the life of Joseph in the events of this chapter. What's the gospel? I try to provide you with different definitions over time so that we can take in the fullness of the gospel in all its facets. Here's a great definition of the gospel from Mark Dever, pastor of a baptist church in Washington, DC:

(The gospel is the) good news is that the one and only God, who is holy, made us in his image to know him. But we sinned and cut ourselves off from him. In his great love, God

⁵ Calvin's Complete Commentary on the Bible. Calvin, John (Delmarva Publications, Inc.), 2015

became a man in Jesus, lived a perfect life, and died on the cross, thus fulfilling the law himself and taking on himself the punishment for the sins of all those who would ever turn and trust in him. He rose again from the dead, showing that God accepted Christ's sacrifice and that God's wrath against us had been exhausted. He now calls us to repent of our sins and to trust in Christ alone for our forgiveness. If we repent of our sins and trust in Christ, we are born again into a new life, an eternal life with God."

Aspects of that perfect life and death are pictured for us here in Genesis 40. Just like Christ would be condemned, though innocent—so was Joseph. Both were victims of false accusations, and both were held captive with two guilty criminals. Both narratives take place during a festival when a guilty criminal was freed, but the innocent man remained under condemnation.

But the most striking similarity here is that both innocent men were forsaken. Joseph was forgotten by the cupbearer. While Jesus on the cross in Matthew 27:46, we read this: ***About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Elí, Elí, lemá sabachtháni?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"***

Here's where I hope this hits home for us today. Just like God wasn't passively standing by in Joseph's abandonment, He wasn't standing idle while Jesus died on the cross, either. As Christ took the wrath that you and I earned for ourselves on the cross of calvary God, in his divine providence, was pouring out the wrath that we deserved on Jesus as the offering that would die in our place.

Isaiah 53:10 says

***Yet the Lord was pleased to crush him severely.
When you make him a guilt offering,
he will see his seed, he will prolong his days,
and by his hand, the Lord's pleasure will be accomplished.***

There's no way Joseph could have seen all that God was doing in these moments. Remember, if we limit ourselves to a God we can see, then our God is too small. Even when we feel alone, we have to remember God has not abandoned us. He has already shown His faithfulness. He showed it on a cross over 2,000 years ago. Let's pray.