

49. The Mysterious Mercy of God's Presence (2007)

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[0 : 00] for all that's going on among us. But we're going to turn now to our Bibles and to our reading this morning. Indeed, the first of two readings. You'll find it in the book of Genesis, right at the beginning of the Bibles, and page 33 in our Church Visitors Bible.

Genesis chapter 39. And we're going to be looking at this chapter and the next one. And so we'll have the reading in two parts this morning, and we'll sing in between.

And I'm going to read this whole passage in Genesis 39 and 40, breaking it where I think the two main acts of this narrative break.

So we're going to read chapter 39 down to verse 20 just now. Now Joseph had been brought down to Egypt, and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, had bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there.

The Lord was with Joseph. And he became a successful man, and he was in the house of his Egyptian master. His master saw that the Lord was with him, and that the Lord caused all that he did to succeed in his hands.

[1 : 09] So Joseph found favor in his sight and attended him. And he made him the overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had. From the time that he made him overseer in his house and over all that he had, the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake.

The blessing of the Lord was on all that he had in house and field. So he left all that he had in Joseph's charge. And because of him, he had no concern about anything but the food he ate.

Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance. And after a time, his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, Lie with me.

But he refused and said to his master's wife, Behold, because of me my master has no concern about anything in his house, and he has put everything that he has in my charge. He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except yourself, because you are his wife.

How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God? And as she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not listen to her, to lie beside her or to be with her.

[2 : 27] But one day when he went into the house to do his work, and none of the men of the house were there in the house, she caught him by his garment saying, Lie with me. But he left his garment in her hand and fled and got out of the house.

And as soon as she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled out of the house, she called to the men of her household and said to them, See, he has brought among us a Hebrew to laugh at us.

He came in to try and lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice. And as soon as he heard that I lifted up my voice and cried out, he left his garment beside me and fled and got out of the house. Then she laid up his garment by her until his master came home.

And she told him the same story, saying, The Hebrew servant whom you have brought among us came in to laugh at me, to sport with me. It's an ambiguous word, meaning to be involved with him sexually.

But as soon as I lifted up my voice and cried, he left his garment beside me and he fled out of the house. As soon as his master heard the words that his wife spoke to him, This is the way your servant treated me, his anger was kindled.

[3 : 38] And Jesus' master took him and put him in the prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined. And he remained there in prison.

Well, let's continue reading in Genesis at verse 21 of chapter 39, where the next story begins to unfold.

It begins in just the same way as the first one. But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love, or covenant love, covenant loyalty, and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison.

And the keeper of the prison put Joseph in charge of all the prisoners who were in the prison. Whatever was done there, he was the one who did it. The keeper of the prison paid no attention to anything that was in Joseph's charge, because the Lord was with him.

And whatever he did, the Lord made it succeed. Sometime after this, the cupbearer of the king of Egypt and his baker committed an offense against their lord, the king of Egypt.

[4 : 51] And Pharaoh was angry with his two officers, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker, and he put them in custody in the house of the captain of the guard in the prison where Joseph was confined. The captain of the guard appointed Joseph to be with them, and he attended them.

And they continued for some time in custody. And one night they both dreamed. The cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt, who were confined in prison, each his own dream, and each dream with its own interpretation.

When Joseph came to them in the morning, he saw that they were troubled. So he asked Pharaoh's officers who were with him in custody in his master's house, Why are your faces downcast today?

And they said to him, We have had dreams, and there is no one to interpret them. And Joseph said to them, Do not interpretations belong to God? Please tell them to me.

So the chief cupbearer told his dream to Joseph, and said to him, In my dream there was a vine before me, and on the vine there were three branches. As soon as it budded, its blossoms shot forth, and the clusters ripened into grapes.

[6 : 00] Pharaoh's cup was in my hand, and I took the grapes and pressed them into Pharaoh's cup, and placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand. And Joseph said to him, This is the interpretation.

The three branches are three days. In three days, Pharaoh will lift up your head, and restore you to your office, and you shall take Pharaoh's cup in his hand, as formerly when you were his cupbearer.

Only remember me when it's well with you, and please do me the kindness to mention me to Pharaoh, and so get me out of this house, for I was indeed stolen out of the land of the Hebrews.

And here also I have done nothing, that they should put me into the pit. When the chief baker saw that the interpretation was favorable, he said to Joseph, I also had a dream.

There were three cake baskets on my head, and in the uppermost basket, there were all sorts of baked food for Pharaoh, but the birds were eating it out of the basket on my head. And Joseph answered and said, This is its interpretation.

- [7 : 04] The three baskets are three days. In three days, Pharaoh will lift up your head from you, and hang you on a tree, and the birds will eat the flesh from you.
- On the third day, which was Pharaoh's birthday, he made a feast for all his servants, and lifted up the head of the chief cupbearer, and the head of the chief baker among his servants.
- He restored the chief cupbearer to his position, and he placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand, but he hanged the chief baker, as Joseph had interpreted to them.
- Yet, the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him. Amen.
- And may God bless to us this, his word. Well, perhaps you'd turn with me to Genesis chapter 39 and 40.
- [8 : 06] Chapters which I think teach us all about the mysterious mercy of God's presence. God be with you is something that we say all the time, even without thinking, isn't it?
- Because we say goodbye, and that's what it means for short. God be with you. And as Christians, I suppose, quite often we will say, with a little bit more intention and meaning, the Lord be with you.
- The Lord bless you. And with good reason, because of course that is the great blessing. at the heart of God's promise of the gospel. I will be with you, and will be your God, he says.
- My presence will go with you, and give you rest. That's what God said to Moses, wasn't it? To reassure him after the dreadful incident of the golden calf. Behold, I am with you always, said the Lord Jesus, as he ascended to glory.
- Our God is Emmanuel, God with us, his people. But what does it mean that God is with us? What does it look like and feel like to have God's presence with us, to bless us?
- [9 : 21] What should we expect when we pray to God to be with us, to bless us, or to bless others? We do pray that often, don't we? Lord, be with our missionary partners.
- Lord, bless them in their work. What are we expecting when we pray that? Well, here are two chapters in our Bibles that give us great insight into the way of God's presence in the life of those he loves.
- And though his presence is always a merciful presence with his people, what we find here is that very often also it is a very mysterious presence, perplexing, and even a deeply painful presence.
- One thing you certainly cannot miss, whatever else these chapters tell us, is that God was with Joseph, and that his presence was blessing and overflowing in blessing all around Joseph.
- Each story begins, doesn't it, shouting that so loudly that not even the most obtuse Cornhill student could ever possibly miss the point. God was manifestly with Joseph as he served Potiphar, says verses 1 to 6.
- [10 : 38] And so also, God was manifestly with Joseph as he served in prison, says verses 21 to 23. Verse 2, you see, the Lord was with Joseph and verse 3, his master saw it.
- Everything he did succeeded. And again, verse 5, the Lord blessed his household for Joseph's sake and the blessing of the Lord was on all that he had. And again, verse 21, which introduces the events in prison.
- Once again, we're told plainly, the Lord was with Joseph in his steadfast love, his covenant love and loyalty. And exactly the same blessing abounds.
- Verse 23, the prison keeper, just like Potiphar, gives everything into his hand. Why? Because the Lord was with him and whatever he did, the Lord gave him success.

Are we getting the point? The Lord, the Lord, the Lord, the Lord was with Joseph. By the way, apart from here, that name, the Lord, only occurs one other time in the whole of these 14 chapters of the Joseph story.

[11 : 45] So, eight times we have it here in just a few verses. It really does mean that the writer is shouting something to us very clearly. The Lord is with this man. He really is in the midst making his blessings flow through this man and all around this man.

So, why such a loud and clear trumpet call like that? Well, of course, because when we get to the detail of each story, Joseph with Potiphar and Joseph in prison, what we see is apparently Joseph receiving anything but the blessing of God's presence.

He's unjustly treated, he's cruelly punished, he ends up forsaken and forgotten. And in each account, there is absolutely no doubt about the powerful presence of God's blessing.

And yet, in each account, it is equally obvious, indeed it's far more up close and personal for Joseph, that his life is full of perplexing pain.

But being blessed and being made to be a blessing to others looks like he's being cursed by God, not being blessed. Now imagine these chapters were here without verses 1 to 6 and without verses 21 to 23.

[13 : 07] If all we read was the account of what happened to Joseph, we'd say, well look, surely God has abandoned this man. But no, these verses right at the beginning tell us that is not so.

So what on earth is going on? Well remember that this whole story is not just Joseph's story, but it's the story of Israel, of Jacob's whole family, the chosen people of God to bless this world.

And what a mess that people are in. And yet God is going to save them. And two of Jacob's own sons are going to be instrumental in that.

Joseph, but also as we saw last time, Judah. Very different men, but both great saviors of God's people. Judah, we saw in chapter 38, learn the cost of disobedience as God humbled him for his service in God's plan.

God broke him and God transformed him for his service. But here now we're seeing God also preparing Joseph and training him for service also as he also is humbled.

[14 : 18] And he learns the cost and the cost and is of obedience to God as he's proved as a faithful servant of God and as a faithful savior of his people.

So let's look at the story and then let's try and make sense of its teaching for us as it helps us to understand more of the mysterious mercy of God's presence at work in the lives of all that he calls to serve him in his kingdom purposes and that is every follower of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let's look first then and for most of our time at the text here in Genesis. What these two chapters here recount for us with aching clarity and with real pathos is the pain of a faithful slave.

The pain of a faithful slave. It's a story of fearful pain that reveals the mystery of God's ways. God was certainly with Joseph and yet it seemed to all the world and no doubt often also to Joseph himself it seemed that God had forsaken him and forgotten him.

As a slave to Potiphar Joseph is faithful both to God and man in his life. He proves competent and constant and chaste and yet his reward is that he is forsaken by all and sent to prison.

[15 : 40] And then as a slave in prison God is faithful also both to God and to man especially with his lips. He proves compassionate and consistent and courageous in speaking God's word and yet all ends up with him being forgotten and left languishing in prison.

Look at the first story in verses 1 to 20. We're reminded in verse 1 how Joseph got to be in Potiphar's household. He was sold as a slave by his merciless brothers. He was alone. He was isolated, an alien in a strange land.

And yet verse 2 says the Lord was with him in that dreadful pain. There's no focus here as there wasn't in chapter 37 on Joseph's feelings. Later on, chapter 42 verse 21, his brothers speak of Joseph's distress and his pleadings for mercy which they had ignored.

So Joseph was not a superman. He was devastated, no doubt, by his situation. And yet God gave him strength to adapt to that situation and blessings abounded around him as he did.

He'd begun to learn, hadn't he, what Paul also learned in prison. But alas, what many Christians never learn, he'd learned to be content in whatever situation he found himself and to recognize that there's no such thing as the ideal circumstances in which to start serving God.

[17 : 10] No, there's opportunity to serve him faithfully anywhere. I can do everything, says Paul, through him who strengthens me, whether in plenty or in hunger, whether in abundance or in need.

And it seems that that was Joseph here. Was he clinging on to what God had revealed to him in those dreams all those years ago that spoke about a future for him in God's plan and purpose?

Maybe. But at any rate, he had not given up his trust in God. Clearly, his master saw his competency, constancy. And Joseph must have spoken to his master about the Lord, because Potiphar clearly attributes the blessings around Joseph to Joseph's personal God.

He saw, verse 3, that the Lord prospered all that he did. And Potiphar was a businessman. He didn't want to waste any time harnessing a profitable manager, just like Laban, remember, with Joseph's father, Jacob.

And so Joseph rises to a place of eminence in charge of everything except the food he ate, that is, his most personal affairs. And it was all success, it seemed. And, verse 6, Joseph had the looks to go with it.

[18 : 31] But it's never easy to live with success, even God-given success. People in that position become a target, don't they, from those who are envious?

And we should remember that, shouldn't we, by the way, if we covet positions that others have that we don't? And those who are specially gifted by God and specially blessed in his service often also are a very real target for enemies and indeed a target for the enemy.

My father often used to quote an old Puritan saying, he who stands closest to his captain is a sure target for the archers. And verses 7 to 18 show us Joseph in the firing line as a target of the enemy, which came in this instance in the form of Potiphar's wife.

She, it seems, was a woman perhaps of a certain age who was either sexually frustrated in her marriage or just had a voracious appetite. At any right, she lusts after Joseph, we're told, and she tries to seduce him.

I suppose it's an older version of Mrs. Robinson in *The Graduate*. Although actually, her words aren't so much enticing as commanding. Lie with me, she says.

[19 : 49] Well, he's a slave after all. But Joseph shows total faithfulness, not only to his earthly master, but to God. It's quite extraordinary, isn't it, in a culture where promiscuity was so common, where it was almost expected among slaves.

What a contrast we have here to his brother Judah. In the previous chapter, a very deliberate contrast is being made. No, says Joseph.

No doubt he's very polite. It's not that you're unattractive. Actually, we don't know whether she was attractive or whether she was hideous. That's not the point Joseph means.

I can't betray Potiphar's trust in me, he says. verse 8. Nor can I abuse verse 9, the sanctity of marriage. You're his wife. But above all, he says, I can't sin against God.

And so despite increasingly difficult and persistent pressure, verse 10, day after day, he would not listen to her pleas for an illicit affair or even her attempts to make it sound more innocent.

[21 : 01] Oh, just come and be with me then, she says. There's no harm in that. Extraordinary pressure, isn't it, when temptation comes again and again and again and when it's made to sound so plausible.

We begin to think, don't we, of all sorts of reasons why perhaps it isn't really such a big deal after all to give in. She does seem such a needy woman and her husband really doesn't give her any attention or affection, so maybe I can just be the emotional support that she needs.

as many a well-meaning man has ended up in an adulterous affair, hasn't he, by trying to help a needy woman in that way, naively. Or maybe he would say, well, she is the master's wife after all and I ought to do what she wants.

I mean, she's responsible for it, I'm just a junior, who am I to say that she doesn't know best? I don't know the ins and outs of that business with the schoolgirl and her maths teacher gone off to France, but no doubt there's an element of that, isn't there, that goes on in the head of any young person when they get involved with somebody older.

Surely they're responsible. Oh, there's self-pity. Joseph, if anybody could say what so many people say, oh, I've had such a hard life, you see, I've been abused in my past, and here's someone who cares for me, here's someone who loves me, who wants me, me, who everybody else has rejected.

[22 : 28] Maybe God has put this person here for me. Joseph could have easily rationalized that way, couldn't he? Just as we can rationalize that way about a romantic relationship that God's word has clearly said is wrong, but we feel in our hearts could be so terribly right.

Another person's spouse, somebody of the same sex, perhaps, that we're attracted to, somebody who's not a fellow believer, but we find ourselves falling in love with.

We say that all the time. But Joseph didn't do that. Joseph kept absolutely clear that whatever his feelings said, whatever his heart might have wanted to say, and moreover, also, whatever he might stand to lose by crossing this woman who had power over him, and I don't doubt that he did fear that she might seek revenge.

he would not do it because he would not sin against God. He wouldn't grieve the Lord his God, even if no one else found out and no one else knew about it.

The very opposite, isn't it, of what happened in the Garden of Eden? Just like the first human beings, here's Joseph given everything, everything, nothing kept back except one thing, what of his wife?

[23 : 55] And instead of grasping for that one forbidden thing, Joseph forbade God and was faithful. We could talk endlessly, couldn't we, about how not to fall into temptation, but in the end, there's only one real power to overcome temptation, and that's love for the Lord our God that makes delight in obeying him the one thing that matters to us.

that we grieve at the thought of dishonoring him. You love his presence more than any other thing. That's the only power to keep you from temptation.

Jesus said, my father and I will come and make our home with whoever loves me, and whoever loves me and keeps my command, he it is who loves me. the Lord was with Joseph, and Joseph would rather lose with God than lose the Lord his God.

Simple as that. Is that true of you? Well, hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, and one day, verse 12, Mrs. Potiphar thought, I'm going to have him, or I'm going to destroy him.

I'm sure she knew fine well that Joseph would never succumb, and indeed he didn't, and he had no option but to flee. And sometimes we also have no option but to flee sin, even though it's easily misunderstood, as Joseph's flight was, especially when there's deceit and lies spread by people with great influence.

[25 : 36] And that's what happened. She spins it with maximum effect, first of all, to the other slaves, who no doubt are deeply envious of Joseph. People hate, don't they? They hate a diligent, honest worker because so often that shows them up by comparison.

And they love to pull down somebody in authority who's been raised above them to eclipse them. People love doing that. And so she whips up a tirade against this Hebrew who laughs at us Egyptians.

I'm sure she probably added, and you know what, he called you plebs. And then she spins it again to Potiphar, verse 17, with a particular dig at her husband.

Do you notice? This Hebrew you brought among us to laugh, to sport with me. She waves Joseph's garment in front of him in accusing fashion. Interesting, isn't it, that Joseph's garment once again becomes a weapon against them.

And so we're told Potiphar's angry. It's interesting, actually, it's rather ambiguous. We're not sure who he's most angry with. I rather suspect that Potiphar knew his wife very well, probably doubted her story.

[26 : 47] He also knew Joseph very well and very likely trusted him. But you see, what happens when people are forced to choose between people like this? Well, just so often happens, doesn't it, that good men are proven to be weak.

And they just do what's most expedient in the circumstances. For Potiphar to challenge his wife to take Joseph's side, well, it would have been hugely difficult, very socially awkward. So he just sticks to the establishment way.

They close ranks. And even though he's going to lose his most able servant, he confines Joseph to prison. Again, actually, that fact, too, might belie Potiphar's belief in the situation, because normally the punishment would have been certain death.

But as Derek Kidner says, Potiphar mingles wrath with restraint, puts Joseph in the royal prison where he is the captain of the guard, is himself in ultimate charge.

But to Joseph, what a terrible blow it must have been as that prison door slammed shut. He must have felt that he was right back at the bottom of that pit in Dothan.

[27 : 59] In fact, as you saw, that's exactly what he names the prison in chapter 40, verse 15, this pit. The Lord was with him. The Lord's blessing is surrounding him.

He had been righteous and faithful to God, indeed, heroically so. But man and woman had dealt wickedly with him again and again.

And yet, verse 20, Joseph was flung into prison and he remains there. While Potiphar's wife, no doubt, lies smiling on her couch, turning her eyes to the newly promoted new manager of Potiphar's household.

I can imagine Joseph in that fearful prison, his sense of terrible injustice, singing with the psalmist of Psalm 73, truly God is good to those pure in heart, but as for me, my steps have slipped, for I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked, and yet my own agony and forsakenness.

And I'm sure many of us have felt exactly the same as well, perhaps at times in our lives. We've said, Lord, why? Well, time passed, says chapter 40, verse 1, probably for several years because by now, Joseph has been in prison more than in Egypt, more than 10 years.

[29 : 26] And another story unfolds about Joseph, now faithfully serving the captain of the guard, most likely still Potiphar, but serving him in prison. But again, the narrative is preceded by another loud reminder.

Don't be mistaken about this. The Lord is still with this man. Verse 21 to 23, God is still showing him steadfast covenant loyalty.

God has not abandoned him. Still, verse 23, whatever he does, the Lord makes it succeed. Why this blast all over again?

We'd never guess it otherwise, would we? Look at what happens. Joseph's showed extraordinary courage, doesn't he? to be first sold as a slave and then to face this huge injustice and find himself in prison.

Verse 15 just gives us a glimpse of the agonies that he was tormented with. I'm still in a pit, he says. I've done nothing to deserve it. And that's enough to break many, many men.

[30 : 35] It takes huge courage to survive in spirit in that sort of situation. Just the other day we were away and we were staying in a hotel. I put the television on. We don't have one at home so it's a luxury for me.

And the film that was showing was the Shawshank Redemption. Some of you will remember the film. It's all about the courage and the resilience of an innocent man who's put in prison.

And he's sustained for years and years and years in terrible circumstances by his great sense of hope. And only Joseph's hope in God's word of promise could sustain him.

And he hasn't lost that. Verse 8 you see of chapter 40 makes it clear doesn't it? Revelation says Joseph interpretations come from God and God alone.

And God had spoken to Joseph all those years ago in his dreams hadn't he? Revealing his place in God's covenant story the story of the promise to his fathers.

[31 : 40] He shows great courage. And also he's shown here to be a man of great compassion. He's assigned these high profile prisoners to attend and he obviously cares for him.

Verse 7 he sees that they're troubled. He wants to help them. Now here is a man if ever there was one who has got every excuse to become hardened and bitter and uncaring.

suffering. But he hasn't. Suffering hasn't hardened his heart. It's softened his heart to others because just like Paul in prison he has accepted it all at God's hand.

He's yielded to God in everything that happened. He's learned another old saying of my father's. Out of the presses of pain cometh the soul's best wine.

And here's a picture isn't it of how to witness to people in trouble. Joseph is genuinely caring. He is the epitome isn't he of godly charity. And yet he is a quiet and a consistent witness to God.

[32 : 48] He's not afraid to confront their pagan ideas. Interpretations of dreams don't belong to Egyptian magicians. Doesn't belong to any men he says but to God.

My God. And he's willing to bring the truth to bear right into their very situation. no need to repeat the story in detail.

You know it very well. The cup bearer is to be restored. Notice how confident Joseph is in what he has said. That's why he says in verse 14 to be remembered to Pharaoh. I don't doubt that Joseph thought at last.

Here is God's provision for me to get out of this prison. But notice also how utterly faithful he is. No dodging the necessary negatives with Joseph.

There's bad news, isn't there for the baker. John Calvin says this, all love to be flattered. Hence the majority of teachers in desiring to yield to the corrupt wishes of the world adulterate the word of God.

[33 : 50] Miss out the hard bits. The true witness must be prepared to give the hard bits. Winding words even at times.

Words that make you unpopular and hated and scorned. That's not easy, is it? I'm sure Joseph spoke these words in verse 19 with great sadness, but he did speak them.

He was faithful to God, utterly, with his lips in prison. This is he had also been faithful with his life. And surely now, surely now, he'll be remembered and restored.

the cup bearers restored, verse 21, just as Joseph said. And maybe Joseph heard about it and rejoiced, and he was just waiting for the good news to come of his own release.

Every day, just listening, listening for the sound of the messenger coming to the prison. Days turned to weeks, weeks to months, and months to years.

[34 : 55] And still no messenger, no release. Verse 23, the cup bearer did not remember Joseph. He forgot him.

Wasn't Joseph singing, how long, O Lord, will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? And wasn't everybody saying, ha, he trusted in God, let God deliver him.

Ha, he blessed others, he can't bless himself. Weren't his former friends, ashamed to be associated with him, ashamed of his chains, dissociating themselves from his shame.

It's extraordinary, you know, Joseph's situation. Clearly, God must have withdrawn his presence from this man. It must be so. He remained in prison, forgotten, and forsaken.

And that's where this scene ends. So, has our text been corrupted? Should verses 1 to 6 and verses 21 to 23 of chapter 29, should they really be cut out?

[36 : 08] So, we can make sense of Joseph's plight, that in fact, it is that Joseph has been abandoned by God, and God has withdrawn his blessings from him. And is that what we conclude in our lives?

When there seems to be nothing but pain upon pain, or disappointment upon disappointment, or bereavement upon bereavement, God must have abandoned us.

Or when you stand in the burnt-out ruins of your church in Pakistan, as our brother Imran did this past week in those photographs that many of you have seen, and all around us are piles of burnt Bibles, do we hang our heads and say, surely God must be punishing these people?

Or if we find ourselves evicted from this building because of the stand that we've had to take, breaking fellowship with the Church of Scotland, because of the truth of the gospel.

And if many say, just look at them, you see, look how wrong they were. God has surely abandoned them. Well, these scriptures before us, I think, give us a different answer, don't they?

[37 : 26] Because the truth about this story is that in the pain of this faithful slave, God was present and God was blessing in the proving of a faithful Savior.

This is a story of God's faithful proving, revealing the mercy of his ways, both in Joseph and through Joseph. He is not forsaken by God, he is being forged by God, he is not punished by God, he is being prepared by God as a true Savior for his people.

Now, we know this when we read to the very end of the story of Joseph here in Genesis, but just turn with me now to one cross-reference that I think helps us see this so very clearly. It's in Psalm number 105.

You'll find it on page 504 in the Church Bible, Psalm 105 at verse 17. Just three short verses that give us an inspired interpretation of Joseph's whole experience of suffering in Egypt.

It's a psalm that speaks of the whole story of God's promise of covenant from Abraham right through to the Exodus. Verse 16 speaks about the famine that took Israel later to Egypt.

- [38 : 37] And verse 17 says God sent a man ahead of them, Joseph, who was sold as a slave, through whom they came to prosper and multiply greatly in Egypt.

But look what he says about what it meant for Joseph, verse 18. His feet were hurt with fetters. His neck was put into a collar of iron. At least that's how the ESV translates it.

A much better translation would be this. His feet or even his body was humiliated as in the shackles and his soul came into iron. The word singular, it's not plural, it's never used anywhere else to mean irons.

What does that mean, his soul came into iron? I think we get a clue from at least three references elsewhere in the Old Testament to iron, each of them associated with Egypt, where God talks about bringing his people out of Egypt, out of the iron-smelting furnace.

Egypt was the place of affliction for Israel, and it was the place of affliction for Joseph before them. And what this psalm is really focusing on is not so much the shackles on Joseph's flesh, but what was going on in his soul, in his whole being.

- [39 : 56] Joseph was humbled and bowed low bodily. Every part of this man became as iron in the smelter. That's the force of what's being said, until, verse 19, until the word of the Lord tested him or proved him true, as the NIV has it.

And again, that word testing or proving is the word meaning refine, to purge away the dross, leaving pure and bright and valuable metal. And that was the cost to Joseph.

That this family of wanderers who came to Egypt would be made, as verse 24 of the psalm says, fruitful and numerous, stronger than their foes. Joseph's experience in these fires of affliction was integral to the saving of all his brothers, of all of God's people, so that they might fulfill their destiny as the chosen people of God.

His humiliation, his brokenness, his obedience and his faithfulness, in that place of terrible temptation and trial, so unlike his brothers, his experience in God's iron furnace, where he learned the cost of obedience, that is what proved him to be a faithful savior.

And that is what God was doing for the saving of many lives. And so in a very real sense, Joseph was cut off from the land of the living.

- [41 : 35] For the transgressions of his own people, he was stricken. And it was the Lord's will to crush him and to make him suffer, just as Isaiah later spoke of another servant in that way, for the saving of many lives.

Don't begin to ring bells for us as we think inevitably of another beloved son who trod the paths of darkness and forsakenness alone, who went courageously into enemy territory, who became as nothing, as a servant, and learned the costliness of deep obedience for the saving of many lives.

And bringing many brothers to glory, says the apostle, and to the inheritance that none of them deserve. What does the Hebrews writer tell us? Although Jesus was a son, he learned obedience for what he suffered.

And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him. And bringing many sons to glory, God made the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering.

His feet were humbled. He was brought low. His soul was as iron in the smelter. Until what he foretold came to pass.

- [43 : 00] Until the word of the Lord proved him true. Until, as Matthew chapter 2 reminds us, out of Egypt, says the Lord, I have called my son in his great exodus, in the great exodus, for the saving of many, many lives from the darkness of sin and death forever.

He looked always to all the world, didn't it, as though Jesus had been abandoned by God and forsaken. The crowds mocked him and said that.

His own disciples abandoned him. Even Jesus himself cried out, my God, why have you forsaken me? As the clouds of darkness gathered around him in his pit of despair.

And yet, in all of that, he was proved to be a faithful savior. Through his suffering at the hands of evil men, God meant it for good, for the accomplishment of the saving purpose for which he came.

See, friends, when you read the story of Joseph here in Genesis, it's the life of Jesus, and above all, it's the death and resurrection of Jesus that sheds light on the whole of this story.

[44 : 19] And it explains not only the mystery and the pain in Joseph's life, but also in the lives of all the servants who are true servants of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Because what we see in Joseph's story here is the pattern also for all faithful servants. This is a story with such a familiar pattern just because it enfleshes in Joseph's life and experience the mystery of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It's the shape of his experience that will always shape the lives of everyone who follows him. Those of the servants of Christ who came before him like Joseph and played their part in the coming of his kingdom, but also in the life of every single one who has come after him who plays their part in proclaiming his kingdom and preparing for his coming again in glory.

It's the pattern of the cross of Christ. It's the pattern of Calvary that is embedded in the lives of everyone who is united to the Lord Jesus Christ by faith.

And that's why as you read the Bible from beginning to end you'll find this familiar pattern again and again and again and again. Joseph knew terrible affliction rejected by his brothers.

[45 : 42] Moses whom God sent as a savior and redeemer, he also was rejected. David, God's anointed king, new agonies and treachery. All the prophets, not least Jeremiah that were beginning to study, who ended up also in a pit.

Read Stephen in Acts chapter 7 again and again and again, just like all the servants in Jesus' parable that the master sent to the vineyard and to his servants there and were flogged and beaten and mistreated and ultimately he sent his own son.

And he was put to death violently. It's a persistent pattern for all God's true servants because all true servants of the Lord Jesus Christ are saved into a life whose pattern mirrors his own.

So it shouldn't surprise us. Every page of scripture testifies to this. That's why Jesus says to the disciples on the Emmaus Road, did you not understand that all the law and the prophets must be fulfilled in me and that the Christ, the servant of the Lord, must first suffer and then and only then into his glory.

Nor should it surprise us, friends, when we read the New Testament and we find that every true servant of Jesus also likewise finds this same pattern of life that they are called into.

[47 : 10] It shouldn't shock us when Christ's apostles tell us repeatedly, through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. When they tell us, you must share as a good soldier in the sufferings of God, by the power of God.

Not suffering as punishment from God notice, but suffering by the power of God. Because that is the blessing that we share as true servants of Jesus. That is the blessing of those he is present with to bless.

That's what it means for God to be with us, to bless us and through us. It costs, but that is the marvelous mystery of God's mercy by which he brings salvation to many through servants of the Lord Jesus Christ today.

It costs Joseph to play his part in fruitful service. You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good, he said. It costs Paul his part in God's fruitful service.

Death is at work in us, he says, so that life may be at work in you. Both of these are the words of crucified men, men who are conformed to the pattern of the Christ, who are shaped by the life of Christ.

[48 : 37] And so it will cost every one of us to be faithful and fruitful servants of the Lord Jesus Christ. He prunes every branch that will bear fruit, and that is painful.

When you face mockery and misunderstanding from some who are friends, and even family who might turn against you for your faith, or because you have to make a stand for Jesus, refusing to do something for Jesus' sake, or insisting on doing something else for Jesus' sake, when circumstances seem to conspire against us, and the plans that we had for serving God all seem to fall apart completely.

And sometimes, indeed often, the greatest pain can be inflicted by those who are also within the family of faith, those who are close to us, like Joseph, betrayed by his own brothers, like David, betrayed by some of his dearest.

See, friends, the Bible doesn't hide the truth from us. Loyalty to Jesus as your Savior and Lord can be very, very hard.

It can be harrowing. It's a pattern of crucifixion. And if this story teaches us anything, it teaches us, surely, that all true servants of the Lord Jesus Christ need great courage.

[50 : 04] God's presence with us to bless can be very mysterious and very painful. And it can go on being very mysterious and very painful for a long, long time. It was 13 years before what God had promised Joseph would come to pass.

His exaltation actually came to pass. And all that time, the word of the Lord proved him true painfully in that iron smelting furnace where God was nevertheless with him.

And we may sometimes in our lives find that we have to go a long, long time when all the world thinks we're in disgrace with God too. And that's hard.

John Calvin says, this story points us to Joseph and teaches us to have courage. Be clothed with that same spirit of fortitude, he says, which not even the iron hardness of the wicked shall be able to break.

Hold God's judgment alone, he says, in view, which casts all the perverse judgments of the world into the shade. And submit to any disgrace rather than decline from that path of duty as true servants of Christ.

[51 : 24] We need courage. God's presence is mysterious and often painful. But we do have comfort. As the Lord was with Joseph, so he has promised never ever to leave or forsake those who are his, those who love him and who obey his voice.

Them that honor me, says the Lord, I will honor. The Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast covenant love, even in the shame of prison.

All Paul's Christian colleagues deserted him in his captivity, but not the Lord, he said. The Lord stood with me. And he will stand.

He'll stand with us also. He'll stand with you always. If you also are a true servant of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word that is honest and true, which calls us to reality.

[52 : 40] And yet gives us the courage that we need and the great comfort that we also need. How we pray that you would help us like the Lord Jesus Christ, every one of his true servants, Joseph and Paul and everyone else.

Help us to learn to be content in all circumstances and to know that you are with us, that your rod and your staff will comfort us on every road you cause us to travel.

And so, Lord, help us to follow you more nearly day by day for the sake of your glorious name and of your great love for us.

Amen.