

Text: Genesis 41:1-36

Title: "God's work of providence calls us to faithful wisdom"

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Introduction: Have you ever found yourself counting the days, hours, and minutes until something that you are awaiting finally happens? High school seniors do this every year as they anticipate graduation. Perhaps you have made a similar calculation as you think about your retirement plans, or perhaps you are an engaged couple anticipating a wedding date, so you have counted the days, hours, and minutes remaining prior to the anticipated event.

Our passage begins with a phrase that tells us how long Joseph was in prison: "And it came to pass at the end of two full years." That phrase "two full years" is our English translators attempt to translate a Hebrew phrase that we do not use in English. In Hebrew, the chapter literally begins: "And it came to pass at the end of two years of days." We spend two seconds reading that phrase, but the Lord wants us to remember that each of those two years was full of something called *days*, 365 days a piece to be exact. Many of those days were very long 24 hour periods of loneliness, mindless tasks, discomfort, and injustice.

The God of providence understood exactly how long these two years were for Joseph, because He was with Joseph there in the prison throughout them all. Joseph was in prison, not because he had done wrong, nor even ultimately because his brothers and Potipher's wife had done wrong, but rather because God was working His plan for Joseph's life.

We've seen in our study of Genesis that this plan calls for a response from people like Joseph. If we respond correctly, God's unstoppable plan will be a blessing for us; if not, it will be a bane to us. We have seen previously that we need to

respond with faithful submission and obedience, faithful surrender, faithful purity, and faithful patience. Here in the first part of Chapter 41, I want us to see that God's work of providence calls us to faithful wisdom. God's plan was a blessing to Joseph because he responded to it in wisdom (41:39).

I. God gives wisdom to minister to troubled spirits (vv. 1-8).

Illustration: I remember my mom as a wise person, and when I think about why I remember her that way, I find that it has very little to do with her formal training, exceptional IQ, or the number of counseling seminars she had attended. When I boil down the reason why I remember my mom as a wise person, I come back to those memories I have of her sitting at our kitchen table sharing a cup of coffee with someone whose spirit was troubled about something. She did not have any degree framed on the wall, nor did she charge by the hour, but she possessed a wisdom that came from God, which was a comfort to troubled spirits.

Application: The passage before us tells us not only of Pharaoh's inability to interpret the symbolism of his dream, but also of his troubled spirit. He not only understood that he lacked the meaning of fourteen cows; he also understood that he should have an answer, that he desperately needed an answer. This is the kind of need that the wisdom of God meets especially well. It is not a wisdom that merely clarifies the answer to an equation or tells the correct meaning of a catechism, a doctrine, or a dream; it is a wisdom that meets the spiritual needs of troubled people. It is the kind of thing that can calm the troubled waters of a spirit's problems.

Let's look at some examples of this: God endowed the people of Israel with His wisdom so that they could be a blessing to other nations (Deut. 4:5-8); God endowed Solomon with wisdom so that he could take care of the troubles of his subjects (1 Kings 3:7-9).

There is a kind of wisdom, popular even in the New Testament church, that is a false wisdom because it is not the kind that is concerned about troubled spirits (Col. 2:20-23). Contrast this approach to wisdom with the musical one described for us in Col. 3:16. In our study of James we saw another example of an imposter for the wisdom of God in chapter 3 (vv. 13-18). Imposter wisdom creates strife among God's people; whereas the true wisdom of God ministers to the spiritual needs of people.

So what about you and I? Perhaps we have come to believe that we think we know a thing or two, but is God using what we know to minister to troubled spirits? This is why Solomon says, "He who wins souls is wise?" (Prov. 11:30).

II. God gives wisdom when we are willing to admit our mistakes (vv. 9-13).

Illustration: I have used the word *mistakes* in my point, but that is something of an euphemism. Our translation uses the word *faults*, which is a little better, but that too can be something not really serious. I make a mistake when I misspell a word as I am typing up my sermon notes. I might say that one of my faults is that I am all thumbs when typing. I would not call that an offense or a sin, I would call it a mistake or fault. Our failures are sometimes easier to admit when we call them mistakes or faults rather than offenses or sins, but if we want more of God's wisdom, we need to be willing to admit that many of our mistakes and faults are serious sins.

Application: The cupbearer does exactly that. He uses the same word for his sin that Moses uses for it back in 40:1, where it is translated *offended*. Notice also that the cupbearer uses a plural when he says *my faults*. Undoubtedly, he was referring not only to his offense against Pharaoh, but also to his offense against Joseph. He should have remembered Joseph prior to the end of these two years, and he did not.

So why is the cupbearer's willingness to bare all important to us here? I want us to see that his confession is part of injecting God's wisdom into this situation. If the cupbearer was unwilling to confess his wrong, God's wisdom would have remained missing. God's wisdom works that way for us too. The path to God's wisdom is paved with the confession of sin.

Let's look at an example of this in the life of David from Psalm 51. Verses 6-7 show us the relationship between being purged from our sins and understanding God's wisdom. This restored wisdom brings with it a restored ability to teach (v. 13). Let's be a people who regularly make confession of sin our path to God's wisdom.

III. God gives wisdom so we can bring Him glory (vv. 14-32).

Illustration: Have you ever been made to feel like the rank amateur you know you are? I have fancied myself a baseball coach every once in a while, but I know very little about the game of baseball. My fellow coaches have helped me out with instructions on how to teach kids to pitch the ball and what drills to run in practice, and that has been great. I think I am a better basketball coach than baseball coach, but even there, were John Wooden or Bobby Knight to come to one of our practices, the phrase *rank amateur* I'm sure would immediately come to their minds.

Egyptian society considered their Pharaoh a god-incarnate. Pharaoh had a cadre of wise men who functioned as his priests. As we read Joseph's encounter with these, Pharaoh and his men begin to look very much like rank amateurs when it comes to trying to be god and god's priests. This is because the glory of the true God begins to shine through one of His true wisemen. We need to learn from Joseph's example how to make that happen in our lives as well. God gives us wisdom so we can bring Him glory, and I want us to see three principles from Joseph's example in this regard:

A. Our wisdom brings God glory when it is couched in a respectful demeanor (vv. 14).

Application: Joseph hurries to be on time, shaves, changes his clothes, and addresses Pharaoh in the third person (v. 16). How he looks, how he sounds, how seriously he takes his timeliness, all go together as forms of his communication to this world leader. They are all designed to send the message that Joseph respects Pharaoh, that Joseph considers this meeting with Pharaoh something very important.

Illustration: Much of Christianity today seeks to deny that our appearance or clothing is a form of communication. The idea is that we dress to be comfortable, not to communicate anything. While living in South Carolina and going to Bob Jones University there, I had an irate man on the phone one time tell me that all of us Bob Jones churches were judgmental and stuck up, and that if he wanted to worship the Lord on Sunday morning at church in his pajamas God would not mind. Well, this attitude fails to understand that our appearance communicates respect or disrespect depending on its appropriateness for what we are doing. If I had my pajamas on this morning, I would be communicating to you disrespect for the task at hand. We need to understand that manners are important, that how we look and what we sound like matters. If God has given us wisdom, we need to make sure that it is couched in a respectful demeanor so as to bring Him glory. See Ecclesiastes 10:1.

B. Our wisdom brings God glory when it gives Him credit up front (vv. 15-16).

Illustration: Can you imagine Joseph answering Pharaoh, "Well thank you; I've tried to do my best." Perhaps it would have been best not to disclose too quickly that you are a believer so as to get into the good graces of Pharaoh first and hopefully get yourself out of that prison. Make Pharaoh

believe that you are a dream interpreter who deserves to be free, and then get to telling him about the Lord later.

One commentator, the Lutheran Leupold, made a wonderful observation about Joseph's willingness to give God glory when complimented by Pharaoh as the interpreter of dreams: "We may well be astounded at the downright honesty which refuses to profit even in an emergency by a slight distortion of the truth. As far as Joseph was concerned, absolute truthfulness in guarding God's honor was far more important than personal advantage. After twelve years and more of injustice, Joseph's first consideration is not deliverance but to take care that his relation to his God be entirely right" (1025-1026).

Application: How often do we tell the unbelievers around us, who ask us about the reason for the blessings of our life, that all this has happened apart from us? The idea that it was not my own intuition, or insights, or giftedness, or hard work that made all this happen, but rather the wisdom that comes from allowing God's Word to run my life. We need to verbalize that to those who complement us for the blessings for which God and His truth deserve credit.

C. Our wisdom brings Him glory when it sees that both feast and famine are His doing (vv. 17-32).

Illustration: William Cowper was a close friend of John Newton, the former slave trader that was the curator for the church in Olney when he wrote *Amazing Grace*. Newton asked Cowper to collaborate with him on a hymnal, known today as the *Olney Hymns*. Both before and after his friendship with Newton, Cowper suffered from bouts of manic depression that drove him into periods of insanity. He experienced some depths of emotional suffering that few have, and one hymn he wrote in particular professes his faith in the work of God's providence in both good times and bad. It is entitled "God

Moves in a Mysterious Way” and is #577 in our hymnal. It’s original title was “Light Shining Out of Darkness”:

1 God moves in a mysterious way  
His wonders to perform;  
He plants His footsteps in the sea  
and rides upon the storm.

2 Deep in unfathomable mines  
of never-failing skill;  
He treasures up His bright designs,  
and works His sov'reign will.

3 Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;  
the clouds ye so much dread  
are big with mercy and shall break  
in blessings on your head.

4 Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,  
but trust Him for His grace;  
behind a frowning providence  
He hides a smiling face.

5 His purposes will ripen fast,  
unfolding every hour;  
the bud may have a bitter taste,  
but sweet will be the flow'r.

6 Blind unbelief is sure to err,  
and scan His work in vain;  
God is His own interpreter,  
and He will make it plain.

Application: Joseph was a man who was blessed by the providence of God in good times and bad times, because he had the wisdom and faith to understand that both were God’s doings. He emphasizes this with Pharaoh (vv. 25, 28, 32). If life is a successful feast, God is in control and He has done it for His purposes. If life is a failure of famine, God is in control and He has done it for His purposes. We may not understand those purposes right now, but as Cowper learned, we must repose

in the truth that “God is His own interpreter, and He will make it plain.”

IV. God gives wisdom so we can apply it in a practical way (vv. 33-36).

Application: God gave Pharaoh the dream and Joseph the ability to interpret the dream so that they would have an opportunity to put feet to what they knew to be true. God expects us to do the same. God gives wisdom not so that we can sit in an ivory tower and have people climb it to ask us questions. He gives wisdom so that we can put feet to what we know.

Conclusion: And so have we responded like Joseph with faithful wisdom to God’s plan for our lives. If not, remember the promise of James 1:5, “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.”

“A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction—the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*