

## SOVEREIGN GRACE DOES THE IMPOSSIBLE

### Genesis 41: 1-40

*Please review this week's catechism question.*

#### INTRODUCTION

Have you ever been in an impossible situation, that is, a situation where you felt completely helpless to do what needed to be done or to survive what you were being asked to survive? What was that like? How did it feel to be delivered from the situation?

It is the function of the Bible to help humans see reality for what it is. The biblical stories are not simply interesting stories. They are not simply moral stories showing us how to live and how not to live. Rather, the biblical story is written to persuade us of the nature of reality so that we live with our eyes wide open rather than in the stupor of self-deception. Today, as we look at the miraculous deliverance of Joseph from prison we want to see and feel the reality of our "impossible situation" and to be amazed at the power of God's grace to deliver us from our condition. God wants us to experience and live in the joy of his gracious salvation and so he wants us to feel the reality of our condition apart from grace. We will discover today how sovereign grace does the impossible.

#### STUDY

1. Chapter 41 begins by telling us that Pharaoh had a dream when "two years of days" (literal) had passed. What is the "benchmark" event from which the two years are counted? Why is it important for us to know that these "two years of days" have passed by?

*Joseph lives in the stinking dungeon for two more years after he predicts and then witnesses the deliverance of Pharaoh's cupbearer from prison. God wants us to know how hopeless Joseph's condition is. After Joseph lives through 730 days, knowing on every day that there is a man living in the presence of the most powerful man on earth, who is obligated to be kind to him, but who refuses to intercede.*

*730 days of remembering God's promise to give him a glorious life as the savior of his family and yet to be living in a pit. 730 days to learn how helpless he is to do anything to deliver himself. 730 nights of lying down on filthy straw to the stench of human excrement with no hope of tomorrow being any different from today. 730 days of knowing and believing that somehow, someday this is God's will and that God is working out a perfect plan and yet having no idea of how and when it will happen. 730 days of faithfully, joyfully and effectively serving Christ so that all who are in prison with him have a happier life because he is there. It is after Joseph has spent these 730 days on top of the 3650 previous days in hopeless slavery and imprisonment that God sends a dream to Pharaoh.*

2. Pharaoh has a dream with two visions. How does he feel about this dream?

*It is a dream that frightens the most powerful man on earth. He awakens on this birthday morning, 730 mornings after his cupbearer was delivered from prison, in the midst of a panic attack. He is terrified by the vivid, gruesome, terrible vision of evil and gaunt cows devouring, in a cannibalistic frenzy, well-fed cows and of evil and shriveled kernels of grain eating plump ears of grain.*

3. What does he do? What is the result of what he does (v. 8)?

*He immediately calls for the magician-priests of Egypt's idols and all the wise men of his kingdom and tells them his horrifying dream. But, as v. 8 says, "There was no one who could interpret the dream to Pharaoh."*

4. Joseph and Pharaoh are in impossible situations. Who put them in these situations?

*God did. God sends the dream. God sends the terror. God blinds the minds of Pharaoh's advisors. God has, out of nowhere, on Pharaoh's birthday, pulled back the curtain of reality and confronted the most powerful people on the planet with their impotence.*

5. Why does Pharaoh bring Joseph out of prison?

*He believes that Joseph can help him figure out the meaning of this very frightening dream he has had.*

6. What Joseph asked the cupbearer to do 730 days ago, he finally did. However, how did Joseph expect to come before Pharaoh (40:14-15)? How is his actual appearance before Pharaoh different from what he was expecting?

*Joseph had asked the cupbearer to intercede on his behalf because he was unjustly imprisoned. Joseph imagined standing before Pharaoh and having Pharaoh affirm his innocence and set him free because he deserved to be set free. God's plan is very different from Joseph's plan. He is not bringing Joseph before Pharaoh to have Pharaoh save Joseph but to have Joseph save Pharaoh. God's plan is more glorious than Joseph's plan. Joseph's plan was just to escape prison. God's plan is for Joseph to save Pharaoh and all of Egypt.*

7. If you were in Joseph's shoes what would you choose: immediate release from prison to live as a slave in Potiphar's house or to be the Savior of Egypt after spending two more years in prison? Why? How should we respond when life doesn't go according to our plans?

8. What is impossible about the situation that Joseph is brought into (vv. 12 & 16)?

*Joseph is young. Joseph is a Hebrew; a racially inferior person. Joseph is a prisoner. Joseph is a slave. How can a young, racially inferior, prisoner who was a slave deliver a king? This is an impossible situation. How can Joseph gain his freedom when the only way to do so is to do what scores of wise, powerful and cunning men have been unable to do? God gives Joseph a task that he is completely unable to perform. His freedom and the future of the most powerful man on earth depend upon his ability to do what he has no ability to perform.*

9. After Pharaoh tells Joseph his dream what does Joseph say God is going to do? See especially v. 32.

*There are going to be seven years of abundant harvest. However, these 7 years of abundance are going to be followed by seven years of famine that will make the abundance seem as nothing. The want and terror of those seven years will eradicate the memory of the years of abundance. Please note v. 32. "The matter has been firmly decided by God, and God will do it soon." God is about to bring the whole world into a state of hopelessness. He is going to place not just a Hebrew boy and an Egyptian king into an abyss of terror but he is about to subject the entire known world to impossible conditions. This is an apocalyptic vision that is not just the fantasy of human doomsayers but the determination of the sovereign God who "does whatever pleases him in the heavens and on the earth and in the seas and all their depths." This is an overwhelming and unstoppable calamity that no human will be able to escape.*

10. What are all the impossible situations that this chapter describes?

- *Joseph remains in prison for two years after his best hope of escape comes to nothing.*
- *Pharaoh has a dream that terrifies him and no one can interpret it.*
- *Joseph, the imprisoned slave, is called before Pharaoh and given the task of interpreting the dream that none of the wise and powerful men of Egypt have been able to figure out.*
- *God is going to bring an unstoppable and overwhelming catastrophe upon Egypt, upon the known world.*

**Sovereign grace does the impossible by relegating men to impossible situations.**

11. According to v. 16 how does Joseph feel about his ability to interpret dreams? How does this verse strike you in light of the fact that vv. 25-36 are Joseph explaining the meaning of the dream?

*Joseph knows that if there is going to be any good coming out of this impossible situation, then God is the one who will perform it. Joseph knows that if there is going to be any help for Pharaoh it will not come from him but from God. Joseph has learned that he is weak but that God is strong. He is ignorant but God is wise. Joseph has no ability*

*to interpret dreams; only God has that knowledge and ability. Joseph knows this even though he also knows that he is going to be the one who will speak and tell Pharaoh what his dreams mean. It is not a contradiction for Joseph to say, "Apart from me God will give an answer of peace to Pharaoh" and then for Joseph to speak. Joseph has learned in and through his 13 years of slavery and unjust imprisonment that "apart from Christ, he can do nothing." Any good that Joseph has ever done has been done by God. Any insight he has that helps others has been given by God. This is not simply religious double-talk, this is reality.*

**12.** Compare v. 16 with Paul's statements in 1 Cor 4:7 & 15:10. How are they similar? What does this mean for us?

*Just as Joseph knows that only God can interpret dreams and yet he is the one who explains the meaning of the dreams, so Paul knows that the only reason he has ever done anything for the gospel of Christ is because God has done it in and through him. Paul has worked but the reason he has worked is that God has worked in him. In fact, everything that any human has or is has been given by God. Every time you pat yourself on the back for doing good or being wise, you are engaging in the highest form of self-deception. You are not good and you have never performed any good, except that which God has done through you. You are not wise, except God has given you wisdom. You are not a hard worker, except God has made you a hard worker. We are always dependent and never independent.*

**13.** What does Joseph tell Pharaoh in vv. 25 & 28?

*God is revealing to Pharaoh what he is about to do. God is under no obligation to inform Pharaoh but he graciously tells him what is about to happen. Don't miss this. God is going to send seven years of abundance and then seven years of the worst famine that Egypt; that the world has ever seen. There is no reason that God should tell anyone what he is doing. He is under no requirement to do so. He can do whatever he pleases and no one can say to him, "what have you done?" However, he chooses to tell Pharaoh what is going to happen.*

**14.** Why does God tell Pharaoh that he is about to bring this disaster upon Egypt? (See vv. 33-36, especially v. 33)

*The reason that God told Pharaoh what was about to happen is so that Pharaoh, Egypt, and the whole world could find a man who would save them from this disaster that God was bringing on the whole world. God told Pharaoh about the disaster that was coming so that he, his nation, and the world could escape the disaster through the work of a wise and discerning man. God tells them of the disaster so a savior can spare them from the disaster.*

**15.** Why does God tell us about our sin, our inability to escape sin and about his judgment upon sin? (See Ezekiel 33: 7-11, Romans 3:21-26 in light of 3: 9-20)

*God has a plan that he is working out in the world. He does not have to tell us what he is doing. As the prophet Daniel says, "All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the people of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: 'What have you done?'" Yet, God mercifully, kindly, graciously tells us what he is about to do so that we will look for a Savior. We must find a Savior that is wise and discerning and who can effectively work to save us from the disaster that is coming upon the whole world. Humans are in an impossible situation. We are sinners. We love to sin. We hate God. We ought to be sent into an eternal hell for our rebellion. In addition, we have no desire or ability to change. All of us are blind to that reality. However, God has kindly sent into the world his own dear Son to confirm all that the prophets have written about our condition. God, because of his great love for us, has revealed to us the nature of reality and what it will take to deliver us out of the disaster that is coming. His word confronts us with our need for a Savior.*

**16.** How do you feel when you read about sin and God's judgment against sin? How do you respond when you hear others talk about hell?

**Sovereign grace does the impossible by revealing the way out through his Word.**

17. How do Pharaoh and his advisors respond to Joseph's description of their situation and his analysis of what to do about it? How do they view Joseph?

*They see in this young, Hebrew slave the Savior of the world. In spite of Joseph's appearance, they recognize the hand of God upon Joseph. They don't see an imprisoned, despised slave; they see a wise, discerning man upon whom the Spirit of God is resting. They see Joseph as the Savior of the world. Joseph is acknowledged as God's Savior and is exalted in the kingdom of Egypt to the highest position next to Pharaoh. In a moment, he goes from the dungeon to the palace. He is given all authority in the most powerful kingdom on earth. He is given this power and authority for saving the world. He is viewed as the only, unique savior. Twice they say there is no else like him in the world.*

18. In what ways is Joseph a "type" of Christ?

*Joseph points us to Christ. Consider Jesus, the eternal Son of God, the Son of David, heir of all the promises of God, born of a poor peasant woman, growing up in an obscure backwater. Growing up among a people who were enslaved by the powerful Romans. Suffering the derision of the powerful, misunderstood at every turn by those who professed to love him. Yet working in the midst of all this suffering for the good of others. Showing forth the wisdom and discernment that only God's Spirit can give. Finally arrested, deserted, tortured, murdered upon the horrible cross and buried in a tomb. But then raised from the dead by the power of God and now sitting at God's right hand waiting for the day when he will return and deliver all his people from the wrath of God that is coming upon all the world.*

19. According to 1 Cor. 1: 23, what is the message that Christians proclaim?

*We announce that the Savior of the world is a crucified, Jewish carpenter.*

20. How do religious people (Jews) feel about this message?

*The Savior of the world cannot be killed. He must be a powerful, conquering king. A suffering savior is an oxymoron and must be rejected.*

21. How do intelligent, thoughtful, non-religious people (Greeks) respond to this message?

*They think it is a foolish message. The thought that a man crucified as a criminal could actually be the savior of the world is stupid and irrational.*

22. How do those whom God has called feel about Christ and him crucified?

*Jesus, the poor, Hebrew, 30 year old, unjustly arrested, tried and executed man is the power of God and the wisdom of God. He is the Savior of the world. Just like Pharaoh and his advisors saw that Joseph alone, out of all other men, had the Spirit of God resting upon him and was more wise and discerning than any other man, so those whom God regenerates by his Spirit see Jesus as the only Savior of the world. And when they do, they are rescued out of sin and God's wrath against sin.*

23. How do you feel about Jesus? How does he appear to you?

**Sovereign grace does the impossible by rescuing people through the Savior of the world, Jesus Christ.**