

# Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 264

Joseph – A Mysterious Life

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,  
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,  
on Lord's day evening, 6th May, 2007**

**Text:** *"Do not interpretations belong to God?" (Genesis 40. 8).*

What a remarkable and mysterious life was the life of Joseph: the favourite of his father Jacob; the coat of many colours; hated by his brethren; cruelly treated; thrown into a pit; sold to the Midianites; then a slave in Egypt; seeming to prosper in Potiphar's house; then falsely accused by Potiphar's wife; the dreadful temptation in which he honoured God and stood firm; then thrown into prison; then after a time the dreams of the butler and the baker which he interpreted; and then the butler forgetting all about him; and then later on Pharaoh himself having strange, remarkable dreams and the butler remembering the poor slave in prison, Joseph; Joseph brought forth, giving the meaning of Pharaoh's dreams, even advising him what to do; and then suddenly exalted next to Pharaoh, lord over all the land of Egypt. Now what a strange, what a mysterious life!

Did you notice, beloved friends, that again and again as we read the mysterious, remarkable life of Joseph, we have this: "But the Lord was with him"? Again, one of those glorious *buts* of the Word of God: "*But the Lord was with him.*" Let us be clear, Joseph certainly did not always feel that the Lord was with him, and because the Lord was with Joseph it did not mean that everything was smooth and easy and comfortable. Rather it was the opposite: sore, bitter trials. But the Lord was with Joseph, which means this: that everything worked together for Joseph's good and for the honour and glory of the Lord's name, and that the end of the thing was better than the beginning. Beloved friends, it always is. With God's people, the end of the thing is better than the beginning, and if they do not see it on earth, they certainly see it in heaven.

But as I remind you so often, Joseph did not know the end. Joseph did not know that he was going to be ruler over the land of Egypt. It all seemed so impossible. With all these cases in the Word of God – Moses in the bulrushes, David going to fight against Goliath, all of them – we know the end of it. The disciples in the storm crossing the Sea of Galilee – we know the end of it; they did not. They were in the middle of it; they had to walk it out. But the Lord was with them, and God is always with His

people. Those of you who know and fear the Lord, God is with you; God is always with you. “He hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.” But you will not always feel it, and it does not mean that things will always be easy. But it does mean that everything will work for your real good and for the honour and glory of God. “We know,” says Paul, “that *all things* work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose.” And if anywhere in Scripture you see that blessedly exemplified, it is in the case of Joseph, in the life of Joseph, all things working together for good. Now Joseph could not always see it, Paul could not always see it; Joseph could not always feel it, Paul could not always feel it; and you cannot always see it, you cannot always feel it. But the Word of God says, We *know* it. “We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose.”

Now Joseph here was in prison and that word which we read in a few seconds, Joseph had to walk it out: “He was *there* in the prison.” An Egyptian prison was not a pleasant place – not like these modern English prisons with all kinds of amenities – and Joseph’s prison was not a nice place. “He was *there* in the prison.” How long, we do not know. But have you ever noticed, which is made very, very clear if you compare scripture with scripture: it was thirteen years from the moment when Joseph was thrown into the pit by his brothers to the time when he was exalted by Pharaoh to be lord over the land of Egypt. Thirteen years are a long time, and Joseph had to walk them out day by day, and many of them in great trouble.

“But God was with him.” When Joseph was in the prison, there was one thing that stood out, and really it stood out all through Joseph’s life, and in it is a very blessed example for the people of God. It was this: he possessed the tender fear of God, and that made him submissive where he could not understand, and that helped him, and that caused him to stand against the awful temptation of Potiphar’s wife, the dreadful temptation of Satan. And you girls and boys, you young people, you will be tempted just like Joseph was, this evil sin of immorality. If there is the inclination and if there is the opportunity, who can stand unless upheld by the power of the Lord? But it was the fear of God. “How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?” May you boys and girls possess that holy fear of God which will give you a religion in the Lord’s sight so that you walk before Him. May all our congregation be blessed with the holy,

tender, filial fear of God, and that will put everything right in our lives – everything – and it will affect everything in your lives – everything – and it is only as you possess the fear of God as “a fountain of life, to depart from the snares of death,” that you will stand in the trying hour.

“How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?” And the emphasis: *How? How* can I do it if I am an object of the Saviour’s love? And how can *I*, a sinner so favoured? And how can I do this *great* wickedness? The world today does not speak about great wickedness. It says that “everyone does it,” and that “it is just what you expect,” and that “people have a fling.” “How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin *against God?*” Because sin is always against God.

But Joseph “was there in the prison.” This word I have read as a text was spoken when Joseph was *there* in the prison, and these things were happening *there* in the prison. There are three things, beloved friends, I have specially noticed about Joseph’s behaviour in the prison. He was not sullen and sulky and miserable. The first was this: he was not ashamed to speak about his God. He was not ashamed to speak about his God to his brothers and they hated him. And that is one of the greatest trials, when it is people in your own family who do not like you and misunderstand you. He was not ashamed to speak about his God to Potiphar. We are told that Potiphar could see that the Lord was with him. How did Potiphar know anything about Israel’s God? Dear Joseph must have told him. And here, he was not ashamed to speak of his God. They hoped he could interpret their dreams, but he says, “Do not interpretations belong to *God?*” And even when he was before Pharaoh he said, “*God* shall give Pharaoh an answer of peace.” He did not hide his light under a bushel. O there is too much of this today.

“Ashamed of Jesus! that dear Friend,  
On whom my hopes of heaven depend!  
No; when I blush, be this my shame,  
That I no more revere His name.”

Now Joseph was not ashamed of his God, and he was far from home. He had not any Bible to read; it was not written. He had not any godly friends to speak to or any godly people to take notice if he did anything wrong. He had not any chapel to attend. He had not any minister to listen to. I wonder how you and I would go on if we were put in a position like that! I remember dear old Mr. Frank Gosden used to say, “I

wonder if I was sent to live in the middle of the Sahara Desert all by myself for the rest of my life, how much religion I would have left.” But that life of Joseph. “I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ.” That is the first thing.

The second thing was his humility. He did not boast that he could interpret. He did not boast he could explain. He did not boast that God had given him some special ability, some special gift. He said, “Do not interpretations belong to God?” – not that I have had dreams and I know how to interpret them. It is only God who can do it. “Do not interpretations belong to God?” Pharaoh said to Joseph, “I have heard say of thee, that thou canst understand a dream to interpret it.” Joseph could have made himself out to be a great man, because in Egypt they loved these magicians and fortune tellers and soothsayers. He could have made himself out to be a great man. Pharaoh said, “I have heard say of thee, that thou canst understand a dream to interpret it. And Joseph answered Pharaoh, saying, It is not in me: God shall give Pharaoh an answer of peace.” Now grace will always humble. A proud Christian is a contradiction, but we have a lot of pride in our hearts. We like to be well-thought-of, but the Lord knows how to deal with us, and He knows how to humble us. But the worst thing of all is spiritual pride. A person can be proud of his ability, his attainments, his wealth, his knowledge, his education. But it is a terrible thing if you find a person proud of his grace. I just say this lovingly. Joseph Hart says,

“The heart uplifts with God’s own gifts,  
And makes e’en grace a snare.”

You have had a wonderful blessing. You have a better insight into the Word of God than others. Satan tells you that and reminds you. But the Lord will have all the honour and glory. If you begin to feel like this and to be proud, the Lord knows how to humble you and bring you down. What a blessed example Joseph is in the way of godly humility!

And the third thing, and this has struck me in reading the chapter: the kindness and the tenderness to others that Joseph had. “He was *there* in the prison,” and he was falsely there, wrongly there. There did not seem to be any way of escape, any way out. It seemed he would never see his home again, never see his father again. But he was not miserable; he was not peevish. What am I coming to? One morning he could see this butler and this baker and they were sad. You say, What had this to do with

Joseph? He had enough to make himself sad. He went up to them kindly, saying, “Wherefore look ye so sadly today?” Now the world does not understand the Epistle to the Romans, but, “Ye are our epistle ... known and read of all men,” and if they do not read the Epistle to the Romans, they read you. The world does not understand the doctrine of predestination, but the world understands kindness. The Lord Jesus Christ was always kind. “Be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.”

So this blessed witness of Joseph here in the prison. He was not ashamed of his God. He was so humble. He spoke so tenderly and graciously to those who were in prison with him. And just a comment by the way which you have perhaps never thought of. This simple question of Joseph to the butler and the baker, “Wherefore look ye so sadly today?” was the beginning of that chain of providences which all led up to him being exalted as lord over the land of Egypt. If he had never said, “Wherefore look ye so sadly today?” – if they had never told Joseph their dreams, if he had never interpreted those dreams, well he would have remained in the prison, and whatever would have happened when at last he came out? But,

“His providence unfolds the book,  
And makes His counsels shine;  
Each opening leaf, and every stroke,  
Fulfil some deep design.”

And beloved friends, so much in providence hangs on so little. A word you may speak to someone tomorrow may be the first link in the chain of providence that is going to alter the rest of your life.

Well then, these two prisoners of Pharaoh, the butler and the baker, they had their strange dreams and, “Do not interpretations belong to God?” said Joseph. He was able to interpret those dreams, to explain what they meant. The butler had had this strange dream. It meant he was going to be restored to his position. The baker had had his strange dream, and Joseph was able to explain it. In three days’ time he was going to be brought out of prison and put to death. Joseph there was given the most gracious ability to interpret, to explain the meaning of these dreams of the butler and the baker.

Have you ever thought of it, beloved friends? He could not interpret his own life. He could not interpret the Lord's dealings with him. One day at last he could; one day he did; but at this moment he could not. You think of it – Joseph, what a skilful, blessed interpreter he was. God gave him this wonderful power. “Do not interpretations belong to God?” But he did not know the meaning of his own life. He could not interpret it. Perhaps some of you are there tonight. Why did this happen? What about that? What about that providence? Why this disappointment? Why that trial? Joseph could not interpret his own life.

We have some clear teaching on this in the Book of the Psalms concerning Joseph: “Until the time that his word came: the word of the Lord tried him.” Now what was Joseph's word? Well, it was when he was young and God spoke to him by a dream. In those days, the holy Word of God, the Scriptures, were not written and God spoke to His people by dreams. Joseph had had that dream of the sheaves of corn bowing down to him, and that other dream of the moon and the stars bowing down to him. It was clear what it meant: that one day he was going to be exalted to a wonderful position. God was going to do it, and his father and his brothers would bow down to him. That dream came to him in the way of a word from the Lord, a clear promise. But Joseph could not interpret the Lord's dealings with him. He was in prison in Egypt. “Until the time that his word came” – until it was fulfilled, until he was exalted in the land of Egypt, until his father and brothers stood before him – “until the time that his word came: the word of the Lord tried him.”

Some of you have your burdens and your exercises and everything has gone upside down and contrary to them. Sometimes you find your exercise, your concern which you believe was from God, not just dead but buried in the grave. That is what Ezekiel 37 is all about. “Can these bones live?” The hope of Israel is dead and buried in the grave. “O My people, I will open your graves.” “Can these bones live? ... O Lord God, Thou knowest.” “Until the time that his word came.” Has the Lord given you a word or a burden or an exercise, and enabled you to rest on a word and lean upon it, and yet everything is going against you? “Until the time that his word came: the word of the Lord tried him.” Joseph could not understand or interpret his own life.

One thing I would say to you in much love and mercy: beware of false interpretations. We are all prone to them just as we are prone to false

exercises. Someone has an opening in providence and he interprets it to mean *this*. It may be a false interpretation. Someone has a word from the Lord and they interpret it, and they interpret it falsely. A little illustration of that comes to my mind. It was when I was a young boy and I had a favourite aunt, a most godly woman. She was only young and she had never had a day's illness in her life. One day she had a little spot like a boil on her nose. The poison went to her brain and killed her. My poor old grandfather was troubled above measure because as he prayed for her, he felt the Lord spoke that word to him: "There is hope in thine end, saith the Lord, that thy children shall come again to their own border," and his heart rejoiced. He said, "She is going to get better." And then she died. But then the Lord showed him he had completely misinterpreted it. It meant He was going to take her straight to heaven. "There is hope in thine end, saith the Lord, that thy children shall come again to their own border."

Some have wrongly felt they were called to preach. Some of us have had deep, deep mysteries in our lives that we can never understand. We felt so clearly the Lord was leading us in one direction; we felt so clearly it was His will; we felt so clearly the Lord had spoken; and it never came to pass, so it could never have been God's will.

"Do not interpretations belong to God?" But poor Joseph could not interpret his own life. "Until the time that his word came: the word of the Lord tried him." "Whose feet they hurt with fetters: he was laid in iron." That is the Book of Psalms (105.18). "Whose feet they hurt with fetters: he was laid in iron." "He was there in the prison." The margin gives this rendering: "The iron entered into his soul." That is severe and that is solemn and that is deep. "The iron entered into his soul." Joseph could not interpret his own case, his own life, his own problems, his own exercises. He could interpret the butler's, the baker's, Pharaoh's dreams, but not his own case. One day he did. He saw how it all was right. "Ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good." But Joseph proved this, and I believe underneath it all he knew it all along, that God never makes a mistake.

They used to tell a story of how carpets were made in ancient Persia, the famous Persian carpets. There was a frame with the slaves working underneath with the foreman sitting up on a platform. He was telling one to put in a gold thread and another one a few black threads and another one some scarlet threads. From underneath it looked a mass of



confusion. When the carpet was completed, and not till then, the slaves were invited to go up on the platform and they could see there was not a thread out of place. Everything was perfect; everything was right. So Samuel Rutherford:

“With mercy and with judgment,  
My web of time He wove,  
And e’en the dews of sorrow  
Were lusted with His love:  
I’ll bless the hand that guided,  
I’ll bless the heart that planned,  
When throned where glory dwelleth  
In Immanuel’s land.”

“Do not interpretations belong to God?” Well, you know what an interpreter is. If a man came through that door now and he started addressing us all in Chinese, we would not know what he was talking about, what he meant. But if someone else came in and he could speak Chinese well and English well and he put the Chinese into English, he translated the Chinese into English, he would be an interpreter. That is what an interpreter is: someone who understands something, tells us what it really means when we do not know ourselves, when we cannot understand it.

Now, “Do not interpretations belong to God?” First of all, the Word of God is a blessed interpreter. People say, What is the reason for life? Why are we here on earth? That has been the cry since Adam fell. The Word of God interprets it: the reason why the world was created, God created it, why He created it, what the purpose of it is, what the reason is for man’s existence on earth. The Word of God is a wonderful interpreter. This is a vast subject and I have never really thought about it before, but a book could be written on it: the Word of God as an interpreter. It will interpret God’s dealings with you. Perhaps you cannot understand God’s dealings, but if the Lord brings His dealings to light, the Word of God will be a wonderful interpreter to you.

“Do not interpretations belong to God?” Of course, especially concerning the death of the Lord Jesus. A stranger could read an account and it all seems wrong, all seems cruel – this Man who went about doing nothing but good, falsely condemned, falsely accused, dying such a cruel death. It all seems wrong. It seems as if it should not have happened. But

the Word of God gives a blessed interpretation of it. This was not just a Man; it was the eternal Son of God in our nature. They did not take His life from Him; He willingly laid it down, and there was a reason, a purpose. He stood in the sinner's place. He bore his sin and bore it away. "Do not interpretations belong to God?" Well, sometimes in your reading of the Word of God there are passages you do not understand. Perhaps there are passages that are especially laid upon your spirit. Pray to the Lord to open up what that sacred word means.

"Do not interpretations belong to God?" And then of course in a lesser sense a minister of the gospel, as rightly led by the Spirit of God, is an interpreter. You will come to chapel sometimes and you have your burden, your case, you are perplexed, you are confused, and the preached Word from the pulpit will interpret, explain, tell you the meaning, what you should do, what you should not do, where you are right, where you are wrong.

We often think of that beautiful word in the Book of Job. It is one of those lovely passages – some people call it the gospel in the Book of Job – where the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ is spoken of as the Interpreter. This is a sinner: "Yea, his soul draweth near unto the grave, and his life to the destroyers. If there be a messenger with him, an interpreter, one among a thousand, to shew unto man his uprightness" – not man's uprightness; Christ's uprightness – "then He is gracious unto him, and saith, Deliver him from going down to the pit: I have found a ransom. His flesh shall be fresher than a child's: he shall return to the days of his youth." Now Job's three friends could not interpret Job's problems. They thought they could. Job said, "No doubt but ye are the people, and wisdom shall die with you." But their interpretations were all wrong, but in the end God interpreted Job's case.

Sometimes God's people can understand their case now. Job could not, but the Apostle Paul could. Everything seemed to be going wrong, but he said, "I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel." He knew why. He was in prison, and there were some of the Lord's elect to be called by grace.

"Do not interpretations belong to God." But especially in providence. All God's people at some time or other in their lives have

strange things, mysterious things and things they do not understand. The only thing is to lay them before the Lord, for,

“God is His own interpreter,  
And He will make it plain.”

Our hymnwriter says, “Though clouds and darkness thee surround.” Do you know the cloud? “Thy way is in the sea, and Thy path in the great waters, and Thy footsteps are not known.” Clouds and darkness surround His throne.

“Though clouds and darkness thee surround,  
Still pray, for God will all explain,  
Nor shalt thou seek His face in vain.”

“Do not interpretations belong to God?”

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

Deep in unfathomable mines  
Of never-failing skill,  
He treasures up His bright designs,  
And works His sovereign will.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;  
The clouds ye so much dread  
Are big with mercy, and shall break  
In blessings on your head.

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

His purposes will ripen fast,  
Unfolding every hour;  
The bud may have a bitter taste,  
But sweet will be the flower.

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

William Cowper