

## **Ordinary Joe**

Joseph's Life in the Book of Genesis  
How God Uses Ordinary People to Carry Out His Extraordinary Plans

Message 4 – “Interpreter”

Genesis 40-41

St. Paul's United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown

October 11, 2020

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Greetings to you in the name of God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ! It's so good to be here with you in print. Thank you for joining us for this time of worship – we view your 'readership' as an extension of our online and on-premise services. It's my honor to share with you the Word of God for today. My name is David Woolverton and I'm one of the pastors here. So, as we prepare our hearts for God's Word would you join your hearts with me in prayer? Let's pray –

*Gracious Lord, we give You thanks for this, Your Word, and for the power of that Word to speak hope and new life into our lives. Lord, open us up to Your Word and open Your Word up to us. Teach us what You would have us learn as You conform our lives into the disciples that You have called us to be. Holy Spirit, I pray that You would not only make us hearers of the Word, but help us to live it all for the sake of the One who created us, in Jesus's name, Amen.*

Well, we have been in the midst of a sermon series that we are calling “Ordinary Joe.” And underneath this series we're looking at the Old Testament figure of Joseph in the book of Genesis at the very beginning of our Bibles. What we have been learning very specifically is that

### **God uses ordinary people to carry out His extraordinary plan.**

Ordinary people like you and like me. God uses those ordinary individuals, empowers them mightily through the Holy Spirit to carry out a plan that God has been working on since the beginning of time. You and I, ordinary individuals, get to be part of something that is huge! And what we also have been learning in this series is that if God indeed uses ordinary people, then the question that confronts us is:

### **What does God actually have to do to claim your ordinary?**

Today's message is going to tie in some of the other elements of what we've learned so far. For example, in the very beginning of this journey, we learned that God's ability to use us is not limited by our view of our circumstances. So many times, we view our circumstances through the eyes of what we cannot do rather than what God can. So, we also learned as a by-product of that, that our circumstances change when we do.

And then last week we learned that temptation -- which comes to us in seasons -- is actually an opportunity to reveal who or what defines our life. This is what ordinary Joe has been teaching us -- as Joseph in various different circumstances has gone through major trauma in order to get access to what only God could do to transform it.

So, today we're going to take this up to a deeper level. As we prepare for our next adventure with Joseph, I want to give you one of the guiding philosophies that has defined my life over the past 20 years, if not longer. I've only been able to put words to it over those 20 years and actually I live by this philosophy on a regular basis, if not daily. I want to share this with you - it basically says this:

*For the follower of Jesus, in any given situation, God is doing two simultaneous works:*

- *First, **He uses our unique gifts and skills** to carry out His plans within that situation. No matter what it is, God is using us and all of the unique gifts and skills that He has placed in our lives, to live out God's plan in that situation.*
- *AND, simultaneously, **God is using that situation to actually prepare us** for what God has in store for us that's yet to come.*

And both of those experiences are happening simultaneously. That means that within anything we are facing, God trusts us enough to use the gifts and skills He has given us to represent Jesus in that circumstance -- and at the same time He is using that circumstance to prepare us for what is yet to come. Let's keep that in mind as we look at Joe in the next segment of his journey.

We're going to look at Genesis chapter 40 and 41. Rest assured we're not going to look at ALL of those verses, but I am going to ask us to delve into the heart of these scriptures. Would you please open your Bible or Bible app to Genesis chapter 40. 'Ordinary Joe' is about to teach us how an extraordinary God can transform not only his situation but also a whole bunch of other lives as well.

Alright, so where we left off last week . . . Joe was in prison. He was thrown into prison because he was falsely accused of potentially raping Potiphar's wife. We know that from the clear evidence he was innocent, but he was thrown into prison anyway. We pick up with Joseph in prison and this is what it says in Chapter 40, starting in verse 1:

*Some time later... (Genesis 40:1)*

Let me pause right off the bat. You see that I highlighted those first three words. We don't know how long "*some time later*" means. In the original Hebrew it can be translated literally as "days" but that doesn't give us a quantification -- we don't know how many days. "*Some time later*" could mean that Joseph was in prison for a while. Let's keep reading...

*Some time later, the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt offended their master, the king of Egypt. Pharaoh was angry with his two officials, the*

*chief cupbearer and the chief baker and put them in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, in the same prison where Joseph was confined. The captain of the guard assigned them to Joseph and he attended them*  
**(Genesis 40:1-4)**

Alright, I don't know about you but I was curious about this. I've read this story dozens and dozens of times over the years. Only over the past week did I pick up on something that has eluded me all of those decades. Here it is: Joseph was actually put into prison in the house of Potiphar. It doesn't say it that specifically in those verses, but it does say that he was put into the prison in the house of the captain of the guard. We know from the prior chapter that the captain of the guard is Potiphar. That makes me think that Potiphar actually trusted Joseph a little bit more than what we may have learned last week. So, the captain of the guard, Potiphar, trusts Joseph enough not only to put him into prison within his own domain, but he trusts him enough, based on prior experience, to now test him with a little bit more responsibility as a prisoner. Prisoner Joe has been given the responsibility of the Chief cupbearer and the Chief baker to Pharaoh.

The story continues:

*After they had been in custody for some time...* **(Genesis 40:4b)**

There's that phrase again! So we can't quantify the days, weeks, months or maybe a couple of years.

*After they had been in custody for some time, each of the two men - the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt who were being held in prison - had a dream the same night and each dream had a meaning of its own*  
**(Genesis 40:5)**

This is setting the stage for something really huge. Verse 6 continues,

*When Joseph came to them the next morning, he saw that they were dejected. So he asked Pharaoh's officials (that's the cupbearer and the baker) who were in custody with him in his master's house..." Do you see that phrase again? "In his master's house" - it's Potiphar's house. "Why do you look so sad today?" "We both had dreams," they answered, "but there is no one to interpret them."* **(Genesis 40:6-8)**

Then Joseph said to them,

*"Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell me your dreams..."* **(Genesis 40:8b)**

This is the place where Joseph begins to introduce, within a foreign culture, the essence of what he has learned as a slave: To trust God to define his life. Even when he faced all the false accusations, Joseph by virtue of trusting God has begun to subject himself -- to submit himself -- to the Lordship of Almighty God. He

invites now the cupbearer and the baker to entrust into Joseph's interpretations all of what God might be doing in these dreams.

Let me share with you very quickly what basically happens here. So, the cupbearer has a dream and in it, he dreams that he's going to be restored to his rightful position in Pharaoh's court. The baker also has a dream and Joseph interprets the baker's dream as the baker is not only *not* going to be restored to his position, he's going to lose his head. He's going to die in disgrace. So what Joseph does is he interprets these dreams for these two guys and Joseph's interpretations actually end up coming true. The cupbearer is restored and the baker loses his life and as a part of this whole process of interpretation, Joseph asks the cupbearer, "*Hey, when you get restored to the court of Pharaoh, would you remember me? Would you remember the guy who interpreted your dream?*" So as the story goes on, the Cupbearer in fact does get restored and the cupbearer, it says in verse 23,

*Yet, the cupbearer did not remember Joseph; he forgot him (Genesis 40:23).*

In fact, this was so bad and so obvious that the writer of this account repeats that phrase in essence twice: "*The cupbearer did not remember Joseph; he forgot him.*" The cupbearer was so ecstatic about being restored that he didn't even think about Joe still being in prison.

So, it continues now in chapter 41:

*When two full years had passed... (Genesis 41:1)*

Now we have a quantification of the passage of time. Joseph was in prison at least two full years longer and after those 2 years of Joseph being in prison, the Pharaoh now had a dream. In fact, Pharaoh had two dreams. Both dreams are disturbing enough to Pharaoh that he senses the need to start bringing in all his magicians and advisors. He gathers all of his wise men who may have the answers and, come to find out according to the story, none of them did. Nobody was able to interpret these disturbing dreams. It was in that moment the cupbearer remembered Joseph. So, Joseph is called before the Pharaoh. He's cleaned up, he's shaved, he's given new clothes and he comes into the Pharaoh's court. And Pharaoh says to him basically, "*Hey, I've heard about you. I've heard about your abilities to interpret dreams. Would you interpret my dreams?*" In verse 16, Joseph says,

*"I cannot do it," Joseph replied to Pharaoh, "but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires" (Genesis 41:16).*

I love this phrase here - "**but God...**" We see that throughout scripture, in fact I preached about that earlier this year. Two words that really sum up a whole big picture of what Scripture does in reminding us that ordinary people on our own, we cannot do anything - **but God! But God** can use ordinary people to carry out His extraordinary plan.

What Joseph is doing is he is illustrating for us a very important lesson. That lesson is

**Sometimes the best place to lead is from the second chair.**

It gets even better, what he also teaches us is that

**We need to focus on what God can do - not what we can't.**

I don't know about you, but there's way too many times in my life that given a certain situation, I'm going to think why I can't do what needs to be done or why I'm not the right person. I might be looking at all of the things that are wrong with me or wrong with the choice, but God uses ordinary people to carry out His extraordinary plan. Do you think if He used Joseph He could use you? Let's keep going...

So, we read in verse 25:

*Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, "The dreams of Pharaoh are one and the same." (Genesis 41:25)*

So what Joseph did, in effect, is he took Pharaoh's dreams and he interpreted them through the giftings of the Holy Spirit back in those days and he says to Pharaoh, "both of your dreams are saying the exact same thing." "God has revealed to Pharaoh what He is about to do..."

This is so significant, why? What Joseph is saying to Pharaoh, Pharaoh who is king of Egypt and kind of in a culture where everybody was to bow down to Pharaoh as if Pharaoh is God. What he's saying to Pharaoh is there's somebody above you who is telling you in advance what's going to happen. In essence what Joseph does is he interprets the dreams as follows: "These dreams are both the same, they are both saying the same thing - that Egypt is going to face 7 years of abundance, 7 years of ABUNDANCE! Followed by 7 years of very severe famine. And the famine for the 7 years are going to be so bad that people will forget that they had 7 years of abundance.

Then the **dreamer** turned **interpreter** now becomes an **advisor** to the king! He says this in verse 33,

*"And now let Pharaoh look for a discerning and wise man and put him in charge of the land of Egypt..." (Genesis 41:33)*

Find somebody who knows what to do, put him in charge of Egypt. Verse 39,

*...Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "**Since God** has made all this known to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. You shall be in charge of my palace, and all my people are to submit to your orders. Only with respect to the throne will I be greater than you." (Genesis 41:39)*

So, two things are simultaneously happening in these verses, number 1 - notice I highlighted the phrase "**Since God**" - do you know what's happening? Pharaoh, who's been encultured to believe that *he* himself is God, is taking second chair to God. And at the same time, he is elevating Joseph from being a slave who became a prisoner who is now to be second in command of all of Egypt. This is a major, major advancement for Joseph. "*Only with respect to the throne will I be greater than you,*" it says.

It reminds us again that

**sometimes the best place to lead is from the second chair.**

Verse 41,

*So, Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'I hereby put you in charge of the whole land of Egypt.'* **(Genesis 41:41).**

Then Pharaoh took his signet ring and put it on Joseph's finger. He dressed him in robes of fine linen and put a gold chain around his neck."

I gotta' do this - yet again, Joseph receives a gift of another robe. A pretty darn good-looking robe! The whole journey started with Jacob giving Joseph that robe of entitlement, that robe of favoritism, and then in Potiphar's house he received a cloak, a very special cloak that identified him as a leader of the household of Potiphar. Each time, that coat or that cloak was ripped off of him. Now, he receives a different robe - a very special garment. A garment that lets all of the people know that he's the GUY, he's in charge of all of Egypt, second only to Pharaoh. The story continues...

*Pharaoh had him ride in a chariot as his second-in-command, and people shouted before him, 'Make way!' Thus he put him in charge of the whole land of Egypt. Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'I am Pharaoh, but without your word no one will lift hand or foot in all Egypt.'* **(Genesis 41:43)**

Friends, here's an important lesson out of all of this:

**God increases the capacity of those who are faithful with less.**

For those of you who are familiar with the New Testament, do you remember the parable that Jesus taught about the talents? The master gave talents to the servants in the story and different numbers of talents went to each individual servant and they were to invest them, to do whatever might assist in their stewardship of what the master gave them. The one who invested their talents that became more received even more. Jesus said:

*His master replied, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share in your master's happiness!"* **(Matthew 25:23)**

That's the same principle that we see at play in Joseph's story. It's that principle that reminds us over and over that God uses ordinary people to carry out His extraordinary plan. So, when we look at our limitations, God sees capacity. When we are faithful with the few, God increases that responsibility to include more. All it requires is our willingness to allow God to somehow claim our ordinary.

When we look at it from the vantage point of "the best place to lead is from the second chair," the times when this doesn't seem to play out in our lives may be because we are too busy being in the first chair. We're too busy trying to claim the authority, we're too busy trying to take the driver's seat. We're too busy trying to be the one who's in charge of our lives and what really needs to happen is we have to back out of that first chair and allow God to lead. Sometimes the best place to lead is from the second chair. When we do, we will begin to focus on what God can do rather than on what we can't.

Friends, God wants to use you and me because He's working on a very extraordinary plan. He wants us to be a part of that. Sometimes what we have to do is that we have to get out of our own way. Sometimes we have to get out of our own way. We have to choose to be in the second chair and allow God to lead. Will you do that this week? Will you prayerfully allow God to claim your ordinary? Let's pray.

*Gracious Heavenly Father, I give You thanks for the powerful testimony of Joseph's life in the book of Genesis. Joseph speaks into my life; I know he's speaking into the lives of those who are reading. So, Lord, I pray that by the power of Your Holy Spirit You would very uniquely, increase the capacity of our lives as You become more important than we see ourselves as being. We trust You Lord. Lead the way and we will follow. In Jesus's name, Amen.*