

Genesis 40:1 – 23

¹ Then it came about after these things, the cupbearer and the baker for the king of Egypt offended their lord, the king of Egypt. ² Pharaoh was furious with his two officials, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker. ³ So he put them in confinement in the house of the captain of the bodyguard, in the jail, the same place where Joseph was imprisoned. ⁴ The captain of the bodyguard put Joseph in charge of them, and he took care of them; and they were in confinement for some time. ⁵ Then the cupbearer and the baker for the king of Egypt, who were confined in jail, both had a dream the same night, each man with his own dream and each dream with its own interpretation. ⁶ When Joseph came to them in the morning and observed them, behold, they were dejected. ⁷ He asked Pharaoh's officials who were with him in confinement in his master's house, 'Why are your faces so sad today?' ⁸ Then they said to him, 'We have had a dream and there is no one to interpret it.' Then Joseph said to them, 'Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell it to me, please.' ⁹ So the chief cupbearer told his dream to Joseph, and said to him, 'In my dream, behold, there was a vine in front of me; ¹⁰ and on the vine were three branches. And as it was budding, its blossoms came out, and its clusters produced ripe grapes. ¹¹ Now Pharaoh's cup was in my hand; so I took the grapes and squeezed them into Pharaoh's cup, and I put the cup into Pharaoh's hand.' ¹² Then Joseph said to him, 'This is the interpretation of it: the three branches are three days; ¹³ within three more days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your office; and you will put Pharaoh's cup into his hand according to your former custom when you were his cupbearer. ¹⁴ Only keep me in mind when it goes well with you, and please do me a kindness by mentioning me to Pharaoh and get me out of this house. ¹⁵ For I was in fact kidnapped from the land of the Hebrews, and even here I have done nothing that they should have put me into the dungeon.' ¹⁶ When the chief baker saw that he had interpreted favorably, he said to Joseph, 'I also saw in my dream, and behold, there were three baskets of white bread on my head; ¹⁷ and in the top basket there were some of all sorts of baked food for Pharaoh, and the birds were eating them out of the basket on my head.' ¹⁸ Then Joseph answered and said, 'This is its interpretation: the three baskets are three days; ¹⁹ within three more days Pharaoh will lift up your head from you and will hang you on a tree, and the birds will eat your flesh off you.' ²⁰ Thus it came about on the third day, which was Pharaoh's birthday, that he made a feast for all his servants; and he lifted up the head of the chief cupbearer and the head of the chief baker among his servants. ²¹ He restored the chief cupbearer to his office, and he put the cup into Pharaoh's hand; ²² but he hanged the chief baker, just as Joseph had interpreted to them. ²³ Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him.

Historical and Cultural Background

- *Dreams*: In the Egyptian world, dreams were thought to be a way of predicting the future. Egypt had professional schools (called 'houses of life') that specialized in the interpretation of dreams.¹ God gave a dream to Abraham (Gen.15:12ff.), two to Jacob (Gen.28:10 – 17; 31:10 – 13), and two to Joseph (Gen.37:5 – 11). Joseph has been 13 years in prison (37:2; 41:46).
- *Bread and Wine*: Joseph would have remembered that Abraham celebrated God's victory with bread and wine (Gen.14:18). Pharaoh, worried about poison, trusted his food and drink to the chief baker and cupbearer, among the most trusted people in Egypt, probably with significant political influence.²

¹ Nahum Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: Schocken, 1966), p.218

² Ibid, says, 'The former (the cupbearer) held an important office in the court of Pharaoh, and was actually a trusted advisor of the king. In a document from the time of Rameses III (12th century), we even find butlers sitting as judges.'

Questions

1. How do you think Joseph felt about God while he was in prison? Perhaps angry and confused but also a bit hopeful. He probably sensed that God was blessing him when he drew the connection between Abraham being victorious over his fear (internally) and over the kings who kidnapped Lot (externally). Perhaps God was asking Joseph what Joseph was being victorious over.
2. What questions do we tend to have in our suffering?
3. What do you think the cupbearer and baker were expecting when they entered the prison?
 - a. *Important build up to an application point:* The narrator says that Joseph ‘took care of them’ (40:4). Why is that important? Because Joseph has learned to care for people no matter where he is, because God wants him to bless others. Later, when Joseph becomes the second in command in all of Egypt, directly under Pharaoh, he will care for ‘the little ones’ of both Israel and Egypt. He has a lot of integrity. What he does later will be an extension of who he is becoming now.
 - i. If applicable: For young parents, sometimes it feels like we spend most of our time caring for our kids. For Christians generally, sometimes it feels like we spend a lot of energy caring for people on the margins. Those kinds of lessons are important for the types of leaders we become later, the types of people we become later.
 - b. What do you think Joseph’s motivations were?
 - c. *Important plot point:* If they were entrusted with the drink and food of Pharaoh, what might they have done to get thrown in prison? Probably Pharaoh got sick, or heard a rumor.
4. How do you think Joseph felt when he heard that each of the two men had a dream?
 - a. He is reminded of his own dreams, which inspired him but got him into big trouble with his family.
 - b. The question is, ‘Does Joseph still have confidence in God to communicate in this particular way?’
 - c. How is it that he feels the confidence to say, ‘Interpretations belong to God; tell it to me please’ in 40:8?
 - i. He still believes that God is good, and is depending on God.
 - ii. He has cultivated his relationship with God this whole time.
 - iii. He may still believe in the dreams that God gave him when he was young, or maybe this serves as a reminder to him that God gave him those dreams and is still working to fulfill them.³
 - iv. It’s interesting to note that receiving dreams and interpreting dreams are two different things. When he was younger, Joseph received two dreams and didn’t know how to interpret them (Gen.37). He rushed to others rather than waited on God for the interpretation. This got him into big trouble, and in my opinion, unnecessary trouble, because of how it played into his family dynamics. But now that Joseph is older, he interprets two dreams that he has not received. Apparently interpretation takes more maturity and wisdom and ongoing relationship with God.
 - d. The cupbearer
 - i. How do you think Joseph felt giving this interpretation?
 - ii. Notice that this is the first time we get an insight into how Joseph felt about his betrayal and imprisonment? Is that significant? Joseph now depends on the kindness of a stranger. He is vulnerable and recognizes it. This is very different from his younger arrogance.
 - iii. Application: This is an admirable quality. Although God gives us gifts with which to serve others, He always wants us to feel the need for human kindness and friendship.
 - iv. Similarly, Jesus powerfully prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem and challenged the leaders of his day, but just a short while later, he was in Gethsemane asking humbly for the kindness of his disciples to keep watch with him and pray with him.
 - v. Illus: learning humility
 - e. The baker

³ Nahum Sarna, *Genesis*, p.218 makes a valuable historical point: ‘Despite the fact that Israel shared with its pagan neighbors a belief in the reality of dreams as a medium of divine communication, it never developed, as in Egypt and Mesopotamia, a class of professional interpreters or a dream literature. In the entire Bible, only two Israelites engage in the interpretation of dreams--Joseph and Daniel--and significantly enough, each serves a pagan monarch, the one in Egypt, the other in Mesopotamia, precisely the lands in which oniromancy flourished.’

- i. Why do you think the baker only comes forward after hearing what Joseph said to the cupbearer? He hopes that he will also receive a favorable interpretation. This suggests that the baker knows he is guilty.
- ii. Notice that Joseph begins in the same way: ‘The baskets are three days; within three more days Pharaoh will lift up your head...’ Only at the end does it become clear that he will be beheaded and hung.
- iii. How come the narrator does not include the baker’s reaction? What do you think it was?
- iv. How do you think Joseph felt giving this interpretation?
 - 1. If I were in Joseph’s shoes, I would have felt my stomach turning over. Saying to someone that there will be hard times coming, or even inferring that they did wrong and will have to face consequences, is one of the hardest things to do. But Joseph either learns it here, or shows that he is able to do it. Unpleasant as it is, sometimes this type of message is what God wants us to say.

5. The fulfillment

- a. Did God ordain this or just know this in advance? I believe He knew it in advance because there was an innocence and guilt associated with the cupbearer and baker already. Or, God knew what was in Pharaoh’s mind. God did not cause this to happen.
- b. That had to make Joseph pause to think as well. If God gave the dreams to him when he was young, is He still working towards achieving them?
 - i. Note that the brothers might have hated Joseph without the dreams.
 - ii. Note that God might have been able to fulfill the dreams some other way.
- c. How could the cupbearer ‘forget’ Joseph? This is not a mental, but a moral, lapse. Recall how the language of God remembering His people: He ‘remembered’ Noah (Gen.8:1) and Rachel (Gen.30:22 – 24). God does not ‘forget.’
- d. How might Joseph have felt at this new low point?
 - i. A new hope, a new irony: Joseph knows God is acting still, but he’s had his hopes dashed again in the short term
 - ii. A sign of victory – victory in his partnership with God. With Abraham, God had won a major victory, through Abraham’s faithful response.
 - iii. Application: How do we wait for God? We must simply be faithful to God, waiting for Him to bring about the final victory (or even the interim victories). Often there is nothing we can do to control the outcome.
 - 1. Illus: waiting for a long time for a conflict to settle, and people to be reconciled
 - 2. Illus: Ultimately, we wait for Jesus to renew all things. Dr. Rachel Carson was a biologist, writer, conservationist, a dedicated Christian, and founder of the modern U.S. environmental movement. She loved God’s creation and never lost her sense of wonder and awe taking long walks in nature. In 1962, while she was battling breast cancer, she published a book called *Silent Spring* which focused on the silencing of songbirds by industrial pesticides. This provoked the strong opposition of chemical companies like DuPont and Velsicol, who threatened her with legal action. Dr. Carson was driven by some ‘memory of paradise,’ as one playwright, named Eugene Ionesco, put it. Her book also pointed out the danger of pesticides to farm workers, which gave Chicano leaders Dolores Huerta and César Chávez the scientific information they needed to mobilize for the rights and safety of farm workers, leading to the formation of the United Farm Workers union. Dr. Carson died in 1964, however. She was weakened by her cancer treatments, got a respiratory virus, discovered she had anemia, found that the cancer had reached her liver, and finally died of a heart attack. But her work has had an effect, and continues to. Just to give you some perspective on that: Her work led to the banning of DDT in the U.S. between 1967 and 1972 and the formation of the Environmental Protection Agency in 1970. In 1980, President Jimmy Carter awarded her posthumously the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Many conservation areas have been named after her. Her love for God and God’s creation has been a dream that has been nurtured in many, because it comes from the heart of God. And one day, that dream too will be fulfilled.

- iv. In two more years, Joseph will be called up from prison. He will be vindicated and exalted in ways that was far beyond what he could ask or imagine. And his training with God in Egypt and in prison to be a blessing wherever he is would enable him to be a greater blessing to many. Joseph's example of waiting would serve, perhaps, as inspiration for the prophet Isaiah. To teach the people Israel how to wait for God to fulfill His promises, Isaiah said:

Yet those who wait for the LORD
Will gain new strength;
They will mount up with wings like eagles,
They will run and not get tired,
They will walk and not become weary. (Isaiah 40:31)⁴

- v. In the movie *Joseph, King of Dreams* by Dreamworks, there is a great song Joseph sings in the prison. It goes:

Verse 1:

I thought I did what's right
thought I chose the surest road

I thought I had the answers
But that road brought me here

Verse 2:

So I put up a fight
Now just when I have given up

And told you how to help me
The truth is coming clear

Refrain:

You know better than I
I've let go the need to know why

You know the way
For you know better than I

Verse 3:

If this has been a test
But maybe knowing I don't know

I cannot see the reason
Is part of getting through

Verse 4:

I try to do what's best
To see the best thing I can do

And faith has made it easy
Is put my trust in you

Bridge:

I saw one cloud and thought it was a sky
I saw a bird and thought that I could follow
But it was you who taught that bird to fly
If I let you reach me will you teach me

Refrain:

For You know better than I
I've let go the need to know why
You know better than I

You know the way
I'll take what answers you supply

It's a challenge to see Joseph singing this song before he gets released, but I do think he did come to find peace with God even in prison. May we also find peace with God even in the most difficult of situations.

⁴ Thanks to pastor Brian Morgan (PBC Cupertino) for making this point.