

Genesis 40:1-23

Joseph the Dream Interpreter

Joseph had done everything right, at least he had since he arrived unceremoniously in Egypt. While he may have had his issues as a young boy, it seems that as he matured into a young man, the hardships he faced were used by God to create in him a character worthy of the patriarchs. Yet, though he had served his master Potiphar faithfully, had been an excellent steward of the tasks to which he had been assigned, had honored his God, and had resisted the temptations of his master's wife, he found himself unjustly accused and cast into prison. A relatively comfortable prison, perhaps, but a prison nevertheless.

Yet, as it had been in the empty well in Canaan, and as it had been when he was sold into slavery, Joseph was blessed by God. God continued His presence with Joseph and caused all that he did to prosper. So much so that, like Potiphar, the chief jailer ²²committed to Joseph's charge all the prisoners who were in the jail; so that whatever was done there, he was responsible for it. ²³The warden of the prison did not supervise anything under Joseph's charge, because the Lord was with him; and whatever he did, the Lord made to prosper" (Genesis 39:22-23).

The passage we look at today marks the beginnings of Joseph's journey from an inmate in prison to the position of second only to Pharaoh in Egypt. Indeed, Joseph's "rags to riches" story presages that of the nation of Israel itself, which will emerge from its four hundred year enslavement "with many possessions," as God had revealed to Abraham many years before (Genesis 15:14). Those dreams of his youth which had shown him one day ruling over his family had not detailed how this transformation would take place, and the adolescent Joseph would not have expected that his rise to prominence would be brought about by his humiliation, but such was the plan of God.

The Cupbearer and the Baker in Prison and in Distress

The account simply begins that "then it came about after these things, that the cupbearer and the baker for the king of Egypt offended their lord, the king of Egypt" (v. 1). The "after these things" means an indeterminate amount of time, but there are some things we can have confidence in with regards to the timing of this part of the Joseph narrative. We know that Joseph was sold into slavery when he was seventeen (Genesis 37:2) and came out of prison when he was thirty (Genesis 41:46). We also know that the intervening thirteen years were spent as a slave in Potiphar's household and imprisoned with the king's prisoners. How that time was divided we can only speculate. Obviously, Joseph served Potiphar long enough to win his respect and trust, so much so that he was made head of the household over all the other servants. We also know that Joseph was imprisoned long enough for the chief jailer to see those same qualities and empower Joseph in the same way. But more than that we cannot say. However, since chapter 41 begins "now it happened at the end of two full years that Pharaoh had a dream" (Genesis 41:1), we can conclude that two years intervened between the end of chapter 40 and the beginning of chapter 41. Thus, we can conclude that Joseph was twenty-eight years old when this particular narrative occurs.

The cupbearer to Pharaoh and his baker were in prison with Joseph. There is no record of their crimes, but they had 'offended' their lord, a word used in the Old Testament to describe Joseph's potential sin with Potiphar's wife and that of Abimelech, king of Gerar, against Abraham's wife, Sarah. Thus it may

be that the men committed some offense against the women of Pharaoh's harem, but again that is speculation. Whatever their offense, “²Pharaoh was furious with his two officials, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker. ³So he put them in confinement in the house of the captain of the bodyguard, in the jail, the same place where Joseph was imprisoned” (v. 2-3).

Scripture relates that the cupbearer and baker were confined in the house of the captain of the bodyguard with Joseph. That phrase “captain of the bodyguard” is the same that was used to describe Potiphar (Genesis 39:1). This suggests that they are one and the same and that the prison Joseph (and the cupbearer and baker) were in was some kind of house arrest on Potiphar’s estate, or at least under his jurisdiction. However, that is not certain. There may have been more than one official with the title “captain of the bodyguard” and, if it is Potiphar that is meant, it is surprising that the sacred historian did not use his name, since he had already been introduced in the narrative.

What is clear is that God was working in these circumstances. It was no accident that these men were placed in the same prison as Joseph. And, as we have mentioned, Joseph had responsibility over them, so the three men came into contact frequently over the next, again unspecified, period of time, “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” (v. 4).

Then the crucial events occurred. “The cupbearer and the baker for the king of Egypt, who were confined in the jail, both had a dream the same night, each man with his own dream and each dream with its own interpretation” (v. 5). Dreams have always been intriguing elements of human existence. In our modern world, with its focus on man, many believe that “the interpretation of dreams is the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind,” as Sigmund Freud wrote in his seminal work, *The Interpretation of Dreams*. But for most of human history, dreams were not seen as insights into the mind of man, but rather the mind of God.

In the ancient world, in many cultures, it was believed that dreams were a means by which the gods communicated with mankind. Oneiromancy, the interpretation of dreams, was practiced across the ancient world, and priests and priestesses were specifically trained in, and chosen for, their skills in interpreting them accurately. After all, to correctly interpret a dream given by God was to understand the future. Scripture has mentioned Abimelech (Genesis 20:3) and Laban (Genesis 31:24) as the recipients of dreams. Even the ancient Hebrews believed in the value of dreams as a means of God’s revelation, as we have seen throughout our study of the patriarchs. The study of the entrails of sacrificed animals, the cracks formed by the heating of turtle shells, and the flight of birds was taken as seriously in the ancient world as astrology and palm reading is by some today.

The key element of the narrative, though, is not that the two men had dreams. The point was that they could not interpret them. Had they still been serving at Pharaoh’s court, they would have had access to his interpreters. But imprisoned, they were compelled to interpret the dreams themselves, and this they felt unable to do. And the fact that they were participants in the dreams themselves only added to their anxiety. So, “when Joseph came to them in the morning and observed them, behold, they were dejected” (v. 6). Like most people, their faces reflected their attitude and Joseph, being an attentive servant of the

chief jailer and diligent in his duties, noticed that two of his charges were distressed. We ought to pause and commend Joseph for his compassion. He did not let his circumstances move him to a place of self-pity. Instead, he did what he was supposed to do. He concerned himself with the welfare of those in his charge, and God used that obedience for his benefit.

Then comes the turning point in the passage. Joseph “⁷asked Pharaoh’s officials who were with him in confinement in his master’s house, ‘why are your faces so sad today?’ ⁸Then they said to him, ‘we have had a dream, and there is no one to interpret it.’ Then Joseph said to them, ‘do interpretations not belong to God? Tell it to me, please’” (v. 7-8). Clearly the cupbearer and the baker believed that what they had dreamed would subsequently come to pass. Since they were the subjects of their dreams, it was vital that they knew what their dreams meant. But Joseph did not presume to possess that ability of his own right. Instead, he used the opportunity to testify to his faith in his God. True, Joseph had received dreams of his own and had understood their meaning. But Joseph’s point was not that he had acquired the skill of interpreting dreams, but that God could choose to reveal His providence through them.

The Cupbearer’s Dream and Joseph’s Interpretation

The men were relieved. And eagerly the cupbearer stepped up first and related to Joseph what his dream had been.

“⁹So the chief cupbearer told his dream to Joseph, and said to him, ‘in my dream, behold, there was a vine in front of me; ¹⁰and on the vine were three branches. And as it was budding, its blossoms came out, and its clusters produced ripe grapes. ¹¹Now 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’” (v. 9-11).

Knowing how the narrative ends, it is easy for us to think that this dream can be easily interpreted. But clearly it did not seem so to the cupbearer. Let us look at the imagery. First, we cannot miss the importance of the number three. There are three branches on the vine. On these branches three things occurred. It budded, blossoms came out, and the clusters produced ripe grapes. Also, the cupbearer did three things. He took the grapes, he squeezed them, and he put the cup into Pharaoh’s hand. Finally, Pharaoh, the greatest in the land, is mentioned three times, as is his cup, the chief responsibility of the cupbearer.

Curiously, upon hearing the dream, Scripture does not indicate that Joseph prayed for wisdom or asked God to reveal an explanation. Yet, he gave an answer that was precise, direct, and unambiguous. This was not necessarily what the cupbearer expected. Often, as the historical record shows, these dream interpreters gave vague and cryptic or incomplete answers. This was simply because their position at court, or in the temple, was based on their reputation, and their reputation demanded that they give accurate interpretations of the dreams or other signs they were asked to interpret. By being general and imprecise, they could always claim to have interpreted whatever signs or dreams they had been given, correctly.

Perhaps the most famous example of this from the ancient world was the oracle given by the priestess at Delphi to Croesus, the king of Lydia, when he asked if he should attack the Persians. The oracle was

recorded as stating that if he attacked the Persians, he would indeed destroy a great empire. Croesus attacked and was defeated - the empire he destroyed was his own. But unlike the Pythia, the priestess of Delphi, Joseph was clear and straightforward. ¹²Then Joseph said to him, ‘this is the interpretation of it: the three branches are three days; ¹³within 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’” (v. 12-13).

Apart from the explanation of divine revelation, one might wonder how Joseph knew that the significance of the number three was three days, and not three years. After all, as we will see later, when Joseph discerned Pharaoh’s dreams, the number seven meant years. As Joseph said then, “the seven good cows are seven years; and the seven good ears are seven years” (Genesis 41:26). In this case, Joseph might have concluded that since Pharaoh's birthday was only three days away (v. 20), that the time period referenced by the number was three days.

The idiom Joseph used, “lift up your head” (v. 13), was a phrase meaning “to forgive” or “to show favor” to another. As David prayed,

“But You, Lord, are a shield around me,
My glory, and the One who lifts my head” (Psalm 3:3).

Thus Joseph interpreted the dream to mean that in three days, the cupbearer would be summoned from prison, forgiven, and reestablished in his former position as cupbearer to Pharaoh. This news undoubtedly pleased the cupbearer, who not only was relieved to find his dream interpreted, but interpreted so favorably.

Seeing the face of the cupbearer brighten as he related the news, Joseph took the opportunity to ask a favor. It is often a good time to request a favor when the person from whom you are asking for help has just received good news. And furthermore, this news was life-saving and Joseph had been the one who had given it. So Joseph said, ¹⁴Only 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. ¹⁵For 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” (v. 14-15).

First, we can observe that Joseph did not command, he requested. And he requested modestly. He knew that the cupbearer would be in the presence of Pharaoh in three days. And certainly Pharaoh had the power to overturn the wrongful imprisonment of Joseph. Joseph asked for a ‘kindness’ and he did so with gracious language. Just as the cupbearer was not able to interpret his own dream, so Joseph was unable to make his own defense before Pharaoh. Each needed the help of the other. Joseph had willingly done his part, and now he hoped the cupbearer would return the favor.

But Joseph was not satisfied with asking the cupbearer to act out of kindness. Instead he supported his argument by affirming that his imprisonment was a serious miscarriage of justice. This was likely information about which the cupbearer was ignorant, and Joseph used his opportunity to give an account on how he came to be in the prison. And he also emphasized that he was an alien, and therefore even

more dependent on the cupbearer for goodwill. Thus, the cupbearer would not only be reciprocating the kindness shown to him by Joseph, but righting a wrong as well. And perhaps this informed the cupbearer that he had been assisted by a foreigner, who worshipped a different God, and who freely gave the wisdom his God had given him. All of this was designed to influence the cupbearer to remember Joseph when he came before Pharaoh in three days.

But we must also remark that Joseph did not give details as to the cause of his imprisonment. That is, he does not condemn either his brothers or Potiphar's wife. Perhaps this means that Joseph had matured from his youthful exuberance of giving "bad reports" about others (Genesis 37:2). And finally, the word Joseph concluded his plea with, 'dungeon', is the same word as that used for the well into which he had been cast by his brothers. To Joseph, the situations were one and the same.

The Baker's Dream and Joseph's Interpretation

The baker had been listening. When he heard the very positive interpretation of the cupbearer's dream by Joseph, he stepped forward to relate his own dream. 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; ¹⁷and 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'" (v. 16-17).

No doubt, after hearing Joseph's very positive interpretation of the cupbearer's dream, the baker expected that Joseph would give an equally positive interpretation of his own dream. After all, there were similarities. Again the number three was prominent, as there were three baskets of white bread. And in the top basket were all kinds of delicious baked goods. Also, each dream referred to the occupation of the dreamer. That is, both dreams were framed in reality, not fantasy. Yet, the differences, perhaps unnoticed by the two dreamers themselves, were more significant. First, Pharaoh was not present in the dream of the baker, as he had been in the cupbearer's dream. In addition, the baker was not performing his duties in his dream. Finally, there was nothing in the cupbearer's dream that corresponded to the birds. And the fact that the baker was not able to protect his baskets from those birds and bring the baked goods to Pharaoh would seem an ill omen for the baker.

Regarding the birds, while the term is generic, it is often used to describe birds that feed on carcasses. For example, "your dead bodies will serve as food for all birds of the sky and for the animals of the earth, and there will be no one to frighten them away" (Deuteronomy 28:26). And the reader can be reminded of Abraham fighting off the birds of prey in his vision.

⁹"So He [God] said to him, 'bring Me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.' ¹⁰Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, and laid each half opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds. ¹¹And birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away" (Genesis 15:9-11).

Joseph was as quick with his interpretation of this dream as he had been with the earlier one, and the key phrasing is "on my head" which bookends the account. ¹⁸"Joseph answered and said, 'this is its interpretation: the three baskets are three days; ¹⁹within 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'" (v. 18-19). The baker

must have been shocked. Again the three baskets represented three days. But in this interpretation, Joseph added to the phrase “lift up your head” the words “from you” indicating death. That is, Pharaoh would summon the baker to his court, pronounce sentence, and have him executed.

The wording used indicates decapitation. Yet this might seem contradictory, since Joseph continued, “and will hang you on a tree, and the birds will eat your flesh off you” (v. 19). It need not be so, however. The word ‘tree’ can also be translated as ‘stake’, and to decapitate a person and then leave their body to be consumed by birds and other animals in a public place was a common deterrent in the ancient world, as in the account of David’s punishment on the murderers of Ish-bosheth. “Then David commanded the young men, and they killed them and cut off their hands and feet, and hung them up beside the pool in Hebron. But they took the head of Ish-bosheth and buried it in the grave of Abner in Hebron” (2 Samuel 4:12).

Such a punishment was seen also as a way of showing public condemnation of the crime and thus making it clear that such crimes were not supported by those in power. This was to insure the favor of the gods, who might be displeased if humans behaved badly with impunity. It was even found in the Law of Israel, “²²now if a person has committed a sin carrying a sentence of death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, ²³his body is not to be left overnight on the tree, but you shall certainly bury him on the same day (for he who is hanged is cursed of God), so that you do not defile your land which the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance” (Deuteronomy 21:22-23).

Indeed, it was a strategy that continued well into the late Middle Ages.

Scripture is silent as to why the cupbearer was forgiven and the baker was executed. As with many things in Scripture, as curious as we might be about the details, the intent of the Bible is to relate God’s Word to us and not all the information we might be interested in is relevant.

Fulfillment and Forgetfulness

In three days, events unfolded precisely as Joseph had foretold. It may be that during the birthday celebrations, it was common to adjudicate certain offenses against Pharaoh. Certainly there would be a great feast, and all the important people of the kingdom would be there to pay homage and bring their gifts to Pharaoh. It also may be that the day celebrated was not the actual day of Pharaoh’s birth, but rather the day on which he ascended to the throne. If so, it was customary in many ancient cultures (including Egyptian) for the ruler to release a prisoner. A parallel example with which we are all familiar occurred during the trial of Jesus before Pilate.

“²⁰So 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. ²¹And he restored the chief cupbearer to his office, and he put the cup into Pharaoh’s hand; ²²but he hanged the chief baker, just as Joseph had interpreted to them” (v. 20-22). Notice that Scripture emphasizes that these things happened “just as Joseph had interpreted to them” (v. 22).

When the cupbearer was brought before Pharaoh, he must have had feelings of confidence mixed with foreboding. Certainly he hoped Joseph had interpreted his dream correctly, but he had no prior evidence of Joseph's skills on which he could rely. And being summoned before Pharaoh could only mean either his restoration or his death. Perhaps we can excuse, or at least understand, why the moment overwhelmed him.

Because in his joy at being restored to his position before Pharaoh, he completely forgot about Joseph. "Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him" (v. 23). It would seem that Joseph's fate was sealed forever. Joseph had been forgotten by the cupbearer, but not by God. As an ancient midrash elegantly put it,

"Said the Holy One, blessed by He, to him [the cupbearer], 'you may have forgotten him, but I have not forgotten him.'"

Again, despite his noble actions and God-fearing behavior, Joseph went unrewarded. At least for the time being. But God is always at work, and in His perfect timing, Joseph would be remembered and the trajectory of his life would undergo a dramatic change. And this time, it would be for the better.

Takeaways

First, let us appreciate that Joseph did not dwell on his own misery but continued to do his job and look out for the interests of others. When difficulties come upon us, we can easily slip into a mood of self-pity. Our attention is all on our own circumstances. The needs of others are ignored. Such is not the way God would have us respond. We need to remember that all things, even (perhaps especially) troubling ones, are used by God for our edification. But this happens only in proportion to our submission to the Holy Spirit. As we find God's purpose in our difficulties, we discover more about Him and move forward in becoming more Christlike.

Second, God revealed His will through dreams and Joseph understood them. Today, God reveals Himself through His word, and we would be mindful to be able to interpret and apply that correctly if we are to prosper. Our God is not a God that hides either Himself or His expectations. He has made it clear who we are and what He expects from us. We have been provided with everything we need to make God-honoring decisions in every area of our lives and with any circumstance that comes our way.