

## Forgotten in Your Dreams

### Genesis 40:1-23

Last week we examined the theology of what it meant that the Lord was “*with*” Joseph. Then the narrator put the theology to the extreme test in the tale of Joseph’s betrayal. In the end we learned that the fact that the Lord was with Joseph didn’t spare him from danger and peril, but it caused him to thrive in those settings. But this week the doctrine will go under an even more extreme test. How is God “*with us*” when we are utterly forgotten?

God never does leave us, but sometimes it seems that he does. This is the issue Jacob’s favorite son must face, not for days, weeks or months but years. For ten years God leaves him alone in silence, and just when it looks like there is a human solution to his plight, once again he is forgotten. What happens to the human soul when are dreams are forgotten in the prison of silence? Our blessed narrator has no fear taking on these questions. And the tale that he weaves will shape Israel’s with a spirituality that enables her to live in the worst of times. The question for us is whether we are courageous enough to receive it.

#### I. The Butler and Baker are Imprisoned with Joseph

Gen 40:1-4

**1** Some time after this, the cupbearer of the king of Egypt and his baker committed an offense against their lord the king of Egypt. **2** And Pharaoh was angry with his two officers, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker, **3** and he put them in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, in the prison where Joseph was confined. **4** The captain of the guard appointed Joseph to be with them, and he attended them. They continued for some time in custody. (Gen 40:1-4 ESV)

The narrator introduces this scene with the casual time marker “*after these things,*” which may at first glance appear as a short sequence in time. In reality, Joseph had served an uninterrupted sentence of some ten years (we know that his total time of enslavement is thirteen years - 37:2; 41:46) before the light of providence would break into his dark world. We can only imagine the tension in Joseph’s soul as he served the chief jailer under the shadow of God’s silence. David’s words written centuries later seem appropriate for Jacob’s forgotten son:

Why do You stand afar off, O LORD?  
Why do You hide *Yourself* in times of trouble?

Psalm 10:1

or

How long, O LORD? Will You forget me forever?  
How long will You hide Your face from me?  
How long shall I take counsel in my soul,  
*Having* sorrow in my heart all the day?  
How long will my enemy be exalted over me?

Psalm 13:1,2

But when we seem to be past the breaking point, God does break the silence and opens a door of hope for Joseph through a surprising turn of events. Two of Pharaoh's chief officials, his chief cupbearer and chief baker end up in the same prison (called the *beth ha-Sohar* - used eight times).<sup>1</sup> In contrast to Joseph, however, they were punished for legitimate wrong doing which "*infuriated*" the king . These high-ranking officials supervised the protection of his food and drink and therefore were among the most trusted individuals in the empire and sometimes had significant political influence.<sup>2</sup> With that in mind we can only imagine what anger a breach of trust might cause.

To their surprise when they arrive in the royal prison rather than being treated with contempt by the prison warden, they are served with courteous care and tender concern. Little does Joseph know that God will use this unlikely encounter behind prison doors to open palace doors.

## II. Joseph Interprets their dreams

Gen 40:5-19

### A. God breaks into prison by a dream

40:5-8

**5 And one night they both dreamed—the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt, who were confined in the prison—each his own dream, and each dream with its own interpretation. (v. 5)**

Into that confining place God breaks in through a dream in the night, giving each man his own dream and each dream with its own interpretation. Dreams figured large in the Egyptian world as a way of predicting the future. Egypt had professional schools (called "*houses of life*") that specialized in the interpretation of dreams.

Typical of God's methods, he often uses a medium highly valued in a culture and usurps it for his own ends to demonstrate his lordship overall all. Our text affirms that only God can reveal the future and reigns supreme over all imperial powers. As Sarna observes,

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 oneiromancy flourished."<sup>3</sup>

The two differing dreams on the same night fill the king's prisoners with tremendous apprehension as to their potential fate.

**6 When Joseph came to them in the morning, he saw that they were troubled. 7 So he asked Pharaoh's officers who were with him in custody in his master's house, "Why are your faces downcast today?" 8 They said to him, "We have had dreams, and there is no one to interpret them." And Joseph said to them, "Do not interpretations belong to God? Please tell them to me." (vv. 6-8)**

Joseph's noble character is demonstrated by the care he gives to all in every circumstance, whether to royalty in Potiphar's house or prisoners in the king's prison. Not only does he fulfill his external duties, he also probes into the internal welfare of those under his charge. As Westermann suggests, "Human empathy releases the whole of what follows."<sup>4</sup> Joseph's care grants the king's officials the freedom to be vulnerable and to open their hearts to him. They have had significant dreams, but they lack qualified interpreters. In response Joseph doesn't even blush in challenging their worldview that interpretations belong to God alone, and that God has granted him that gift. As Wenham states, "it is not learning but inspiration that matters."<sup>5</sup>

Joseph invites these two royal officials to them to tell him their dreams, to which the cupbearer appears most eager.

## B. The cupbearer's dream and interpretation

40:9-15

**9** So the chief cupbearer told his dream to Joseph and said to him, "In my dream there was a vine before me, **10** and on the vine there were three branches. As soon as it budded, its blossoms shot forth, and the clusters ripened into grapes. **11** Pharaoh's cup was in my hand, and I took the grapes and pressed them into Pharaoh's cup and placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand."

The cupbearer's dream is built on the number three. First the vine has three branches, then "time is speeded up as he looks at the vine, and in a rapid blur the vine moves from bud to blossom to ripened grapes to wine."<sup>6</sup> Then in three movements the all-important cup moves from his hand to the Pharaoh's hand, an apt metaphor for his restoration to office.

**12** Then Joseph said to him, "This is its interpretation: the three branches are three days. **13** In three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your office, and you shall place Pharaoh's cup in his hand as formerly, when you were his cupbearer.

There is not a lot of interpretation needed by Joseph, except for the three branches that signify three days, which Joseph probably knows is Pharaoh's birthday when he will decide their fate. It was typical on feast days, like birthdays and anniversaries, for the Pharaoh to grant amnesties. On that day he tells the cupbearer Pharaoh will "lift up" his head, a suitable image for his welcome back into the presence of the king. Joseph then seizes on this new relationship as an opportunity for his own release.

**14** Only remember me, when it is well with you, and please do me the kindness to mention me to Pharaoh, and so get me out of this house. **15** For I was indeed stolen out of the land of the Hebrews, and here also I have done nothing that they should put me into the pit." (vv. 14-15)

In these words we are given a rare look into Joseph's heart. He is a man of strong faith ("when it goes well with you") and yet, one in desperate need of human "kindness" (*hesed* is better translated as "covenant loyalty"). What a different Joseph we find from the youth who arrogantly imposed his dreams on his family. For the first time in his story, the narrator reveals Joseph being vulnerable about his pain to a stranger.

Not once, but twice, has he been treated unjustly and ended up in a “pit” (37:24). First he was kidnapped to Egypt, and once in Egypt he was subject to betrayal. And now with a decade of humility in his soul, he reaches out to this fellow prisoner for empathy and the gift of loyalty, hoping that through this “human” connection his divine dreams may find fulfillment.

This is an admirable quality for any believer. Divine gifts do not negate our need for a reciprocal touch of human kindness. The apostle Paul at the end of his life speaks like a prophet when he tells Timothy that he knows his death draws nigh, and he confidently awaits the crown of righteousness. Yet in the very next breath, he pleads for Timothy to come soon and to meet his pressing needs in prison (2 Tim 4:6-13). God keeps even the “greatest” vulnerable and weak to enhance relationships.

As one unjustly accused, the cupbearer should easily identify with Joseph’s plight and be eager to help secure his release. Meanwhile the baker having heard the good outcome of the cupbearer’s dream now finds the courage to come forward with his dream.

### **C. The Baker’s dream and interpretation**

**40:16-19**

**16 When the chief baker saw that the interpretation was favorable, he said to Joseph, “I also had a dream: there were three cake baskets on my head, 17 and in the uppermost basket there were all sorts of baked food for Pharaoh, but the birds were eating it out of the basket on my head.”**

Waltke makes the acute observation that “The willingness of the cupbearer to share his dream suggests his innocence; he has nothing to hide. By contrast, the guilty baker will not share his until he hears a favorable interpretation for the cupbearer.”<sup>7</sup> In his dream the baker looks like a circus clown balancing a banquet on top of his head. The description of the dream conforms well to Egyptian customs. Sarna explains that in Egyptian texts “No less than fifty-seven varieties of bread and thirty-eight types of cake are **attested**”<sup>8</sup> to. What is rather unsettling, however, is that the baker makes no attempt to ward off threatening intruders to this sumptuous banquet (contrast Abraham in 15:11) who seem to come in at will.

Joseph, once again, under divine inspiration has no trouble interpreting the significance of the dream.

**18 And Joseph answered and said, “This is its interpretation: the three baskets are three days. 19 In three days Pharaoh will lift up your head—from you!—and hang you on a tree. And the birds will eat the flesh from you.” (vv. 18-19)**

As Joseph explains the dream to the chief baker, he leaves his ultimate fate in suspense until the last possible moment. At first the repetitive imagery of “*threes*” and “*lift up your head*” sounds predictable and comforting; that is until the final metaphor literally turns on its “head.” Now instead of indicating his restoration to office the image of “*lift up your head*” implies the most shameful death imaginable. The baker will be beheaded, his body impaled on a pole, and finally, instead of a decent burial, birds will peck away at his exposed corpse.

Two men with two different dreams are now slated for two vastly different destinies. We can only wonder how differently they must have slept that night! One would wake to life, the other to death. And for Joseph, perhaps now for the first time in ten years he went to bed with a glimmer of hope for his future release.

### **III. The fulfillment of the dreams**

**Gen 40:20-23**

**20 On the third day, which was Pharaoh’s birthday, he made a feast for all his servants and 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 position, and he placed the cup in Pharaoh’s hand. 22 But he hanged the chief baker, as Joseph had interpreted to them. (vv. 20-22)**

In three days time Joseph’s interpretations worked out exactly as he predicted. The actions read exactly as they were scripted. And just as Joseph predicted, on this day the heads of Pharaoh’s two chief officials were lifted up, one metaphorically, the other literally. The chief cupbearer was fully reinstated in his office, while the chief baker was impaled on a tree. The accuracy of Joseph’s inspiration fills the reader with enthusiasm and hope for his immediate release, as we expect the cupbearer in appreciation to give credit where credit is due. But Joseph’s hopes are dashed as quickly as they were raised.

**23 Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him.(v. 23)**

Caught up in the glory of Pharaoh's party and the thrill of his own fortune, the cupbearer totally forgot the one who had cared for him in prison. To fail to remember in Scripture is not a mental lapse, but a moral one. And in this instance the severity is emphasized by the painful echo "*forgot him.*" As Waltke writes, "The wrongly accused cupbearer should identify with Joseph. His insensitivity to Joseph's plight is **inexcusable.**"<sup>9</sup> So Joseph's hopes that divine providence had opened a door for his release through a human agent are deflated, and it will be another two years before he is indeed remembered, this time through another set of dreams. Where does all this leave Joseph? Where does it leave us? Brueggemann sums up Joseph's plight so well: "The butler forgets Joseph now, even as Egypt will forget him (cf. Ex 1:8). Joseph is left with this question: Is there a *remembering* done by Yahweh beyond the forgetting of the empire? Joseph does not know. The butler does not care."<sup>10</sup>

What do we do when we seem forgotten in our dreams? So often we experience the death of "our" dreams, but do God's dreams die?

#### **IV. Forgotten in our dreams**

##### **A. The God of dreams**

The entire story of Joseph is driven by dreams. God uses a medium that was highly valued in that ancient world and in typical fashion totally usurps it for his own ends. Brueggemann characterizes these dreams in "terms of three crucial theological intents."<sup>11</sup>

**First**, he explains that they have to do with God and God's rule. In so doing he is declaring his absolute lordship over all life. Israel's God alone has the ability to predict and control the future, and he gives the gift of inspiration to whomever he chooses.

**Secondly**, dreams speak about a new situation that cannot be derived from natural powers of observation or any specialized Egyptian school of magic formulas. Neither the butler nor the baker could have deduced their fates apart from Joseph's inspiration.

And **third**, they are *eschatological*. They speak of God's coming resolution of human issues. Their fates will not lie in suspense forever. God will come to act with judgment and salvation.

The gift of dreams had a big impact on Joseph's faith. As the recipient of the "gift" of interpreting dreams he was filled with the certain hope that though he lived under a foreign power, God not Pharaoh was the only true sovereign. These ephemeral dreams had more power to shape the future than all of Egypt's imperial might. We can see in his eager approach to the butler and baker that even serving an unjust sentence for ten years, Joseph never lost faith in this divine gift. And his own dreams fueled his imagination about his future.

The same gift of inspiration governed Israel's prophets whenever they had to confront imperial powers both in Israel and among the nations with God's future, as Amos writes,

Surely the Lord God does nothing  
Unless He reveals His secret counsel  
To His servants the prophets. Amos 3:7

And that same gift is given to all believers in the church. God's final revelation was his Son (Heb 1:1-2) and every believer is given the gift of inspiration through the Spirit to know the mind of Christ (1 Cor 2:12-16) and to comprehend a future and a hope that is beyond description (1 Cor 2:9; Rev 21, 22). This gift should give us a bold confidence (Acts 4:13) in spreading the gospel and speaking to issues in a culture that prides itself on its education and expertise (1 Cor 1:21).

### **B. The fulfillment of dreams – heaven's hope and human touch**

But the tension we encounter is the same as Joseph's. We do not know "how" our dreams will be fulfilled. How does the dream ultimately get from heaven to earth? What human agent will God use to unlock Joseph's dreams? The first time Joseph imposes his dreams upon his family with no wisdom, and was cast into a pit and sold into slavery. Ten years pass in silence. And when the door to that prison opened and those two officials walked in with their dreams, Joseph found renewed hope.

But after ten years in a cell, the same man who seemed to be master of dreams and "Dr. of Destiny" is now making a plea for mercy to the very one he delivered.

As Brueggemann writes, "The powerful man born to rule is also a needful one, one of 'the least' (Matt 25:40, 45). In 39:21, it is affirmed that God shows him 'loyalty' (*hesed*). But in 40:14, he asked for 'kindness' (*hesed*), not from God, but from the imprisoned butler. The liberator of the butler is now himself dependent and in need of



liberation. For all his reliance on God, Joseph must depend on the act of a covenantal neighbor."<sup>12</sup>

In like manner our Lord Jesus, after he powerfully predicts the future destruction of Jerusalem and the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth (Mk 13) is found in utter weakness in Gethsemane making pleas to his disciples to "keep watch" as his soul is "grieved to the point of death" (Mk 14:34). So faith in God and the need for a human touch are not in opposition to each other. Seldom do heavenly dreams get fulfilled without human agents. But in both of these instances, the human touch failed. Joseph was forgotten and Jesus was abandoned. And that brings us to the crux of the whole text.

### **C. The mystery of waiting in our dreams**

Is God still "*with us*" when we are utterly forgotten? As Brueggemann asks, "How do we reconcile the grand claim (v. 8) which seems utterly effective and the unrelieved pathos (vv. 14-15) which ends in dismay (v. 23)?"<sup>13</sup> The answer comes in the most painful of all spiritual disciplines – "*waiting*". God is with us, but as Waltke suggests, "The closing of prison doors is designed by the Lord to open palace doors (Acts 7:10), but only in his timing. Joseph must remain loyal to God, not knowing the future of his own existence."<sup>14</sup> Joseph must wait, and so must we. Sometimes all we have left are the promises of God's word spoken into the void of our dark prisons, and in hope we simply endure.

My friend, the tomato farmer, said the words he found most comforting during this dark season in his life came from C. S. Lewis' *Screwtape Letters*. The chief devil Screwtape explains to his nephew, Wormwood, why God (the Enemy) withholds his presence from those he loves.

You must have often wondered why the Enemy does not make more use of His power to be sensibly present to human souls in any degree He chooses and at any moment...He is prepared to do a little overriding at the beginning. He will set them off with communications of His presence, which, though faint, seem great to them, with emotional sweetness, and easy conquest over temptation. But He never allows this state of affairs to last long. Sooner or later He withdraws, if not in fact, at least from their conscious experience, all those supports and incentives. He leaves the creature to stand up on its own legs-to carry out from the will alone duties which have lost all relish. It is during such trough periods, much more than during the peak periods, that it is growing into the sort of creature He wants it to be. Hence the prayers offered in the state of dryness are those which please Him best...Our cause is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending, to do our Enemy's will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys.<sup>15</sup>

My friend kept obeying, and finally after three years went to his favorite place on a hill overlooking the city to pray. There he cried out in his pain, "God if you don't speak to me, I can't go on!" When he returned to his car and descended down the mountain there came the strange sensation of God's warmth and sweet Presence that he had so remembered. It filled the car and remained with him all the way home. About a year ago, I got a knock on my door. It was Carlos. He was smiling again. After a few tears of embrace he introduced me to his new wife.

In two years time Joseph will emerge from prison vindicated and exalted in ways that defied even the best of his imaginations. And his example of waiting would shape Israel's imaginations for a future out of exile and beyond:

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

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<sup>1</sup> Sarna explains that the term, *the house of the prison*, “is nowhere else to be found in the Bible and may well be of Egyptian origin. If it be Hebrew, then since the basic root may possibly carry with it the idea of roundness, it may well refer to a house of detention within a fortress in which royal prisoners were confined.” Nahum Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: Schocken Books, 1966), 217-18.

<sup>2</sup> Sarna also remarks, “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 (12<sup>th</sup> century) we even find butlers sitting as judges.” Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 218.

<sup>3</sup> Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 218.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted by Wenham in Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16-50* (Dallas: Word Books, 1994), 382.

<sup>5</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 382.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 231.

<sup>7</sup> Bruce Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 527.

<sup>8</sup> Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 218.

<sup>9</sup> Waltke, *Genesis*, 526.

<sup>10</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 325.

<sup>11</sup> Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 323.

<sup>12</sup> Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 324.

<sup>13</sup> Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 325.

<sup>14</sup> Waltke, *Genesis*, 528.

<sup>15</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1982), 38, 39.