



FORGOTTEN IN YOUR DREAMS

SERIES: THE LIVES OF THE PATRIARCHS

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Genesis 40:1-23

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In our last study we examined the theology of what it means that the Lord was “with” Joseph. In the tale of Joseph’s betrayal, the narrator put that theology to an extreme test. We learned that although the Lord was with Joseph, that did not spare the patriarch from peril, but caused him to thrive in those settings. Now that doctrine will be put to an even more extreme test. How is God “with” us when we are utterly forgotten? A dear friend, Carlos, a tomato farmer in North Carolina, endured the greatest trial of his life a few years ago, following the loss of his beloved wife to cancer. He told me that he had prepared himself to face her death, but not what came afterwards. The loss of the love of his life left a gaping hole in his side. But it also seemed as though God had turned his face away, leaving him locked in a prison of indescribable loneliness. Before his wife’s death his relationship to the Lord seemed responsive and intimate, but afterwards there was nothing, just a void. Even more painful to him were the glib answers of well meaning Christians who couldn’t identify with his pain. They merely assured him, “God never leaves us.”

God never does leave us, but sometimes it may seem like he does. This is the issue that Jacob’s favorite son must face now. And he must confront it not for days, weeks or months, but years. For ten years God leaves him alone in silence. And just when it seems there is a human solution to his plight, once again he is forgotten. What happens to the human soul when dreams are forgotten in the prison of silence? Our blessed narrator does not fear taking on these questions. The tale that he weaves will shape Israel’s soul 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 Imprisoned with Joseph (40:1-4)

Then it came about after these things, the cupbearer and the baker for the king of Egypt offended their lord, the king of Egypt. Pharaoh was furious with his two officials, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker. 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. 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. (40:1-4, NASB)

The narrator introduces this scene with the casual time marker, “after these things.” At first glance this may appear to be a short sequence in time. In reality, however, Joseph has served an uninterrupted sentence of some ten years (we know that his total time of enslavement was thirteen years, 37:2; 41:46) before the light of providence breaks into his dark world. We can only imagine the tension in his 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? (Ps 10:1)

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? (Ps 13:1-2)

Finally, however, through a surprising turn of events, God breaks the silence and opens a door of hope for Joseph. Two of Pharaoh’s high-ranking officials, his chief cupbearer and chief baker, end up in the same prison (called the *beth ha-Sohar*, used eight times in this text).¹ In contrast to Joseph, however, they are being punished for wrongdoing (lit. “they sinned”) which “infuriated” the king (*qatzaph*, the Hebrew verb is stronger than the normal term for anger). These officials, who supervised the protection of the king’s food and drink, were counted among the most trusted individuals in the empire, and sometimes had significant political influence.² With that in mind we can only imagine the anger that 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 an unlikely encounter behind prison doors to open palace doors.

II. Joseph Interprets Their Dreams (40:5-19)

A. God breaks into prison by a dream (40:5-8)

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. (40:5)

Into that confining place God breaks in through a dream, giving each man his own dream and each dream its own interpretation. In the Egyptian world, dreams figured large as a way of predicting the future. Egypt had professional schools (called “houses of life”) that specialized in the interpretation of dreams. But God often usurps a culture’s highly valued medium for his own ends, to demonstrate his lordship over all. Our text affirms that only God can reveal the future. He 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.”³

Two different dreams on the same night fill the king’s prisoners with tremendous apprehension.

When Joseph came to them in the morning and observed them, behold, they were dejected. He asked Pharaoh’s officials who were with him in confinement in his master’s

house, **“Why are your faces so sad today?” 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.”** (40:6-8)

Joseph’s noble character is demonstrated by the care he gives to all, in every circumstance, whether 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.”⁷⁴ Joseph’s care grants the king’s officials the freedom to be vulnerable and 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, saying that interpretations belong to God alone, and that God has granted him that gift. As Wenham observes, “it is not learning but inspiration that matters.”⁷⁵

Joseph invites these two royal officials to tell him their dreams. The cupbearer seems the more eager of the two.

B. The cupbearer’s dream and its interpretation (40:9-15)

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; and on the vine were three branches. And as it was budding, its blossoms came out, and its clusters produced ripe grapes. 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.” (40:9-11)

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.”⁷⁶ 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.

Then Joseph said to him, “This is the interpretation of it: the three branches are three days; 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.” (40:12-13)

Not a lot of interpretation is needed, 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 that on feast days like birthdays and anniversaries the Pharaoh would grant amnesties. On that day, Joseph tells the cupbearer that Pharaoh will “lift up” his head, a suitable image for his welcome back into the king’s presence. Joseph then seizes on this new relationship as an opportunity for his own release.

“Only keep me in mind when it goes well with you, and please do me a kindness [*hesed*] by mentioning me to Pharaoh, and get me out of this house. 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 [lit. “pit”].” (40:14-15)

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, he is in desperate need of human “kindness” (*hesed* is better translated as “covenant loyalty”). What a different Joseph this is from the youth who once 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 he has been treated unjustly, ending up in a “pit” (37:24). He was kidnapped to Egypt, and once there was subject to betrayal. 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 might 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, telling 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 meet his pressing needs in prison (2 Tim 4:6-13). Though we have gifts to serve others, God keeps us vulnerable and weak in order 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 its interpretation (40:16-19)

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; 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.” (40:16-17)

Waltke makes the acute observation, “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.”⁷⁷ 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.”⁷⁸ 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), which seem to come in at will.

Once more, under divine inspiration, Joseph has no trouble interpreting the significance of the dream.

Then Joseph answered and said, “This is its interpretation: the three baskets are three days; 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.” (40:18-19)

Explaining the dream to the chief baker, Joseph leaves the man’s 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, rather than receiving a decent burial, birds will peck away at his exposed corpse.

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

III. The Fulfillment of the Dreams (40:20-23)

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. He restored the chief cupbearer to his office, and he put the cup into Pharaoh's hand; but he hanged the chief baker, just as Joseph had interpreted to them. (40:20-22)

In three days' time Joseph's interpretations work out exactly as he had predicted. The actions play out just as scripted. Precisely as Joseph had predicted, on this day the heads of Pharaoh's two chief officials are lifted up, one metaphorically, the other literally. The chief cupbearer is fully reinstated to his office, while the chief baker is 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 to give credit where credit is due. But Joseph's hopes are dashed as quickly as they were raised.

Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him. (40:23)

Caught up in the glory of Pharaoh's party and the thrill of his own fortune, the cupbearer totally forgets the one who had cared for him in prison. In Scripture, failure to remember is not a mental, but a moral lapse. In this instance, the severity is emphasized by the painful echo, "forgot him." As Waltke comments, "The wrongly accused cupbearer should identify with Joseph. His insensitivity to Joseph's plight is inexcusable."⁹ So Joseph's hopes that divine providence had opened a door for his release through a human agent are deflated. Another two years will elapse 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: "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."¹⁰

What do we do when it seems we are 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 highly valued in that ancient world and usurps it for his own ends. Brueggemann characterizes these dreams in "terms of three crucial theological intents."¹¹ First, he explains that they have to do with God and God's rule. God 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.

This 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. And 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 the baker that even as he served an unjust sentence for ten years, Joseph never lost faith in this di-

vine 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. Amos wrote,

"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 is 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 unwisely imposed his dreams upon his family, he was cast into a pit and sold into slavery. Ten years passed in silence. But when the door to that prison opened and the two officials entered 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 doctor of destiny now makes 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."¹²

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 (Mark 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" (Mark 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. This 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? 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)?"¹³ 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. But Joseph must remain loyal to God, not knowing the future of his own existence."¹⁴ 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 that the words he found most comforting during the 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.¹⁵

My friend kept obeying. Finally, after three years, he 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 descended down the mountain there came over him the strange sensation of God's warmth and sweet Presence that he had so remembered. It filled his car and remained with him all the way home. About a year ago, Carlos visited me again. This time he was smiling. 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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1. Sarna explains that this 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, 1966), 217-18.

2. 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 (12th century), we even find butlers sitting as judges." Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 218.

3. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 218.

4. Quoted by Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16-50* (Dallas: Word, 1994), 382.

5. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 382.

6. Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: Norton, 1996), 231.

7. Bruce Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 527.

8. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 218.

9. Waltke, *Genesis*, 526.

10. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 325.

11. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 323.

12. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 324.

13. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 325.

14. Waltke, *Genesis*, 528.

15. C. S. Lewis, Letter 8, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Macmillan, 1982), 38-39.