

## **Another "Pit" for Joseph Genesis 39:20—40:23**

And Joseph's master took him and put him into the prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined, and he was there in prison. But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison. And the keeper of the prison put Joseph in charge of all the prisoners who were in the prison. Whatever was done there, he was the one who did it. The keeper of the prison paid no attention to anything that was in Joseph's charge, because the Lord was with him. And whatever he did, the Lord made it succeed.

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

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. When Joseph came to them in the morning, he saw that they were troubled. So he asked Pharaoh's officers who were with him in custody in his master's house, "Why are your faces downcast today?" 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."

So the chief cupbearer told his dream to Joseph and said to him, "In my dream there was a vine before me, and on the vine there were three branches. As soon as it budded, its blossoms shot forth, and the clusters ripened into grapes. 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." Then Joseph said to him, "This is its interpretation: the three branches are three days. 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. 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. 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."

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, 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." And Joseph answered and said, "This is its interpretation: the three baskets are three days. 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."

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. He restored the chief cupbearer to his position, and he placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand. But he hanged the chief baker, as Joseph had interpreted to them. Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him. **ESV**

**Introduction** — By the time we come to this episode in Joseph's story, he has already shown signs of spiritual greatness. Joseph has served Potiphar by faithfully managing everything the man owns. More importantly, he did not allow himself to be compromised by Mrs. Potiphar's relentless seductions, and endured her slanderous accusations. But that quickly became an example that, "No good deed goes unpunished."

So now Joseph is serving time for crimes he did not commit. Nonetheless, there is a hidden force in his life which is turning that gross injustice into a means of discipleship and eventual blessing for all sorts of people. That this would happen had first come to Joseph through two dreams he had experienced when he was just seventeen years old. But the dreams weren't as important as the power behind them. That power is expressed in **39:21** and, again, in **39:23**: *the Lord was with Joseph in everything he did*. And so, in what could have been a terrible turn of events, Joseph actually prospered, matured, and was used by God in the furtherance of the Lord's grand redemptive plan.

Certainly, huge challenges awaited Joseph on the other side of his prison experience, when he would become the vice-regent of Egypt. Not only was it a pagan nation, but the entire ruling class was caught in a web of unbridled ambition, sensuality, and intrigue. What's more, Joseph was the only godly man in the entire realm. But through it all,

he remained faithful both to his calling as the Lord's person in that environment. But, for now, he needed further shaping, which is what his Egyptian imprisonment would provide.

**I. Prisoner Care** — Eleven years have passed since Joseph was sold into slavery, and he is now twenty-eight years old. It is at this point that two prominent prisoners join him in "the pit," as he calls the prison (**40:15**). The royal cupbearer and the baker held the life of the Egyptian Pharaoh in their hands. That's because they were charged with the purity of his food. The cupbearer tasted the king's wine before it came to him. The baker or "royal table scribe," as he was also called, was responsible for the menu served to Pharaoh. We are not told why the two landed in prison. Perhaps they were suspected of plotting the ruler's death after the king became ill while eating.

Whatever it was, the responsibility for the two prisoners' care fell to Joseph. As **40:4** tells us: "The captain of the guard appointed Joseph to be with them, and he attended them. They continued for some time in custody."

**II. Troubling Dreams** — Prisoners in such straits were prone to nightmarish dreams, and two assigned to Joseph were no exception. And for Egyptians, dreams were taken very seriously; seen even as the window to another world. Egyptian society even included professional dream interpreters whose "dream books" were used to make sense of dreams and predict the future. However, the two prisoners were cut-off from those "experts" and their tools.

Thus we read, "When Joseph came to them in the morning, he saw that they were troubled. So he asked Pharaoh's officers who were with him in custody in his master's house, 'Why are your faces downcast today?' 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'" (**40:6-8**).

Joseph's response to the prisoners is a clear sign of how God was working in his life and preparing him for greatness. His compassion for them is in stark contrast to what he had been as a self-absorbed teenager.

But not only was Joseph sensitive to these men, he was also exceedingly God-centered. His response reveals a worldview in which

turning to the Lord had become an immediate instinct (cf. **39:9; 41:16, 51, 52; 45:8**)—a trait that is truly essential for godly leadership.

Joseph's response also reveals that he considered his own two dreams to be from God and that they would eventually come true. Though they had come to him more than a decade before, he had no doubt as to their Source, and that had given him undying confidence even in the worst of situations.

**III. Interpretations** — And so, Joseph first heard the cupbearer's report which, as one commentator puts it, "was like a Home and Garden video on fast-forward. In it, a three-branched vine appeared, sprouting blossoms that became clusters of grapes. The grapes were then picked by the cupbearer, squeezed into Pharaoh's cup, which was then placed in the sovereign's hand so he could drink the juice. Joseph's interpretation was a positive one. "Then Joseph said to him, 'This is its interpretation: the three branches are three days. 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'" (**40:12-13**). And so, great days lay ahead for the cupbearer; and he was tremendously encouraged by Joseph's interpretation.

Joseph then asked a simple favor of the man. "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. 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" (**40:14-15**).

Walter Brueggemann identifies an important lesson here: "The powerful man born to rule is also a needful one." That is, the great heroes of Scripture are never seen as artificial supermen or women. They all experience struggles and face formidable foes. For Joseph, those long eleven years had been a continual test that had challenged his emotional stability, just as it would ours. But it must be stressed again that the powerful x-factor, the thing that made all the difference, was his trust in the faithfulness of God and what God was doing in his life. As the apostle James would later write to a persecuted church:

"Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let

steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (**Jas. 1:2-4**).

Then it was the baker's turn. Hearing the positive interpretation of the cupbearer's dream must have given him hope for his own future. And so, he told Joseph, "I also had a dream: there were three cake baskets on my head, 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" (**40:16-17**).

In this dream, the baker carried three baskets on his head; a real feast for Pharaoh. The description, "all sorts of baked food" reflects a royal menu, as the Egyptian dictionary lists thirty-eight kinds of cake and fifty-seven varieties of bread. But in the baker's dream, this gourmet's delight was looted by birds of prey, and none of the delicacies got to the king.

Joseph's interpretation of that dream was the polar opposite of what he had said to the cupbearer. "And Joseph answered and said, 'This is its interpretation: the three baskets are three days. 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'" (**40:18-19**). The baker's head would also be "lifted up" alright—right off of his body! What's more, his body would provide a feast for the birds!

**IV. Fulfillment** — Egyptian literature records the granting of amnesty on Pharaoh's birthday, as well as on the anniversary of the ruler's accession to the throne—which was seen as the birth of a god. Hence we read, "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. He restored the chief cupbearer to his position, and he placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand. But he hanged the chief baker, as Joseph had interpreted to them" (**40:20-22**).

Every last detail of Joseph's interpretations proved to be true, which must have greatly encouraged him! For eleven years he had continued to believe that his own dreams would be realized. This conviction had remained in spite of changing circumstances. Now he had solid evidence that God had gifted him with dreams and the power to interpret them. In addition, Joseph had used this gift to help someone with direct access to the Egyptian throne. It only followed, then, that

Joseph would soon be sprung from prison, then immediately begin his ascension to a position of authority.

But that did not happen. Instead we read, “Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him” (**40:23**). And so, Joseph waited, and waited, and waited. And nothing happened! Perhaps after just the first month, he knew the truth. And the waiting continued: an entire year passed, and then another. It would be two whole years until the cupbearer finally remembered Joseph, and only then because he figured that Pharaoh would be grateful for the recommendation.

But God’s purpose for Joseph was behind the two year delay. As R.T. Kendall puts it: “God selected Joseph as the chief instrument for a work that would live for generations. God chose Joseph to do something that would later be recognized and revered in history. *But Joseph had to wait for his time to come because he had to wait for God’s time.*”

The experience of long delay is common among the great figures of Scripture. Abraham’s wait for a promised son—Moses’ forty years of preparation in the desert—David’s anointing as a boy, then year’s of delay in the fields of Judea, then his flight from Saul and hiding in a cave. Even Jesus did not commence his earthly ministry until he was thirty years old.

Likewise, Joseph experienced one disappointment after another: his brothers murderous rejection, punishment for withstanding Potiphar’s adulterous wife, a decade in prison, and now painful disappointment because of a forgetful cupbearer. Joseph’s life teaches us that disappointment is a key element of spiritual growth because it requires faith and a transference of hope from people and things (including ourselves) to God. As a Christian leader once put it: “Delay never thwarts God’s purposes; it only polishes his instruments.”

**V. Patience Makes Perfect** — I dare say that, though it is one of the “fruit of the Spirit,” patience is in short supply these days and especially in this culture. Ours is a consumer society. We want virtually everything the way we want it, and we want it right now. Because of this, delay and disappointment drive us crazy. But here’s the problem: the virtue of Christian patience can only be developed through disappointment, and who wants that?

As we see with Joseph, much of our disappointment is because of mistreatment or at least treatment we see as unfair. Mistreatment comes in many forms, but most of it falls into one of four categories. First, there is *undeserved treatment from people*, often our own family members.

The second category of mistreatment is the *unexpected restriction of circumstances*. This happens when you are suddenly confined, either emotionally or physically. You can't get beyond either your own emotions or your physical circumstances—or both.

The third sort of mistreatment is *untrue accusations*. And if such lies weren't enough, they are passed on to people who don't know the truth and believe them. Added to this, is that it often takes awhile for the object of lies to learn of them, which makes correcting them especially difficult.

The fourth category is *unfair abandonment*. In some ways, this may be the most painful mistreatment of them all. Spouses abruptly leave their husbands or wives. Generosity is exploited and benefactors are forgotten. Credit is never given those who have worked long, creatively, and hard for the company. Friends take a hike because of either a misunderstanding or some molehill that has grown into a mountain.

Joseph experienced mistreatment in each of these categories—and, guess what, so do we. It is, therefore, fortunate that we have been given his example here in Genesis. But the choice of following his lead is up to us. Really, it all boils down to two choices: Either to become disillusioned and embittered, or to use the difficulty as a platform for putting our hope and trust in the living God. Certainly, that will never be easy. But if you and I know Scripture, we also know the only correct choice.

“But they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint” (**Isa. 40:31**).