

Average Joes

Faithful When Waiting:
Genesis 40

Joseph in Prison

Since two years separate the dreams of this chapter from Joseph's elevation to high position (41:1) and he is thirty years old when elevated (41:46), Joseph spends eleven years in Potiphar's house and in prison, though there is no indication how that time period divides. The officers whom Joseph encounters in prison are high-ranking members of the court. They are responsible for safeguarding two of the ways that a potential assassin could strike the king. They not only had to be extremely trustworthy individuals of unquestioned loyalty to the king; they also had to be fine judges of character lest an enemy with intent to poison the pharaoh infiltrate their staffs.

Genesis 40 gives no hint what sequence of events has landed these officials under Joseph's care. Offenses against Pharaoh certainly could take many forms. Whether these officials are suspected of involvement in a conspiracy or just guilty of displeasing the king in the disposition of their duties is impossible to tell. Perhaps Pharaoh got sick from a meal and they have come under suspicion. Perhaps they are under house arrest, awaiting the investigation of charges against them (John Walton, *NIV Application Commentary: Genesis*, Zondervan, 672).

When Joseph is in prison he comes into contact with two important people in the ancient Egyptian world, the cupbearer and the baker. Some Bible translations give his title as a "butler", but cupbearer is more likely as he probably served wine or beer to the Pharaoh and his guests. It might seem strange for a baker to be important in the royal court, but he was responsible to prepare food not only for the living pharaoh, but for his mortuary temple and priesthood. This perhaps was what exalted him. He was charged with insuring the happiness of the deceased through a constant flow of offerings into the temples and mortuary priesthood. These offerings often took the form of cakes and breads, of which Egypt had a wide variety (John J. Davis, *Paradise to Prison: Studies in Genesis*, Baker, 272-273).



Digging
Deeper

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*You intended to harm me,
but God intended it for
good to accomplish what is
now being done, the saving
of many lives.
Genesis 50:20*

*Digging Deeper is always
available for download at
www.alpinechurch.org*

The prison that Joseph found himself in may have been led by Potiphar himself. In Genesis chapter 39:1 we read that Potiphar is the “captain of the guard” and in 40:3-4 we learn that the prison is under the authority of the captain of the guard. As such this was a prison that was for political and court prisoners. Its location would have been close to the capital. The imprisonment the cupbearer and the baker faced was real but not rigorous. Joseph was appointed to attend their needs (40:4). Later Egyptian evidence indicates that this is realistic enough. One treason trial of court officials records that several judges were punished for carousing with the prisoners on trial. The prison of Joseph and the two dignitaries was apparently a place of detention attached to the household of the captain of the guard, in proximity to the court. It appears, however, the captain of the guard did not take care of actual charge of the prisoners. This fell to the job of the warden (K. A. Kitchen, “Joseph” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia: Volume 2: E-J*, 1128).

Dreams in the Ancient Near East

In the ancient Near East, dream interpretations were sought from experts who had been trained in techniques and methods of the day. Both the Egyptians and Babylonians compiled what are called “dream books,” which contain sample dreams along with a key to their interpretation. Though some of the interpretations in the biblical accounts may seem transparent or self evident, dreams often depended on symbolism, and the symbols might not stand for what was most logical. The dream books preserved the empirical data concerning past dreams and interpretations and therefore offered the security of scientific documentation. It was believed that the gods communicated generally through dreams, but that they revealed the meanings of dreams by giving wisdom in the expert's research.

Joseph was not familiar with any of the “scientific” dream literature and would not have had access to it, so he consulted God. Interestingly, his interpretation still follows the way the dream literature interpreted comparable symbols. A full goblet, for instance, was indicative of sorrow. As is common in Mesopotamian literature, Joseph draws a time indication from a number featured in the dream (Walton, 672-673).

Israel shared with its pagan neighbors a belief in the reality of dreams as a medium of divine communication. However, it never developed, as in Egypt and Mesopotamia, a class of professional interpreters. 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 divining flourished. Moreover, in each case, the Israelite is careful to disclaim any innate ability, attributing all to God. The interpretation of dreams was not the work of magic, but of God (Davis, 274-275).

God's Purposes for Joseph

The epilogue to the Potiphar story is clear in its emphasis. God has turned an intended evil against Joseph into a good. God was with Joseph (39:21) and prospered his way. Lying behind the course of events, then, is the lesson which the whole of the Joseph narratives intends to teach: “You intended it for evil but God intended it for good” (50:20). Like Daniel during the Exile, Joseph suffered for doing what was right, but God turned the evil done to him into a blessing (John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch As Narrative*, Zondervan, 212).

3. What kind of promises can we rely on when we are in times of waiting?

4. Think of a difficult time of waiting in your life. How did you cope with waiting? How did this time effect your relationship with God? What would you do differently?

5. Why do you think God allows us to go through periods of waiting?

6. How does having the right perspective help us in times of waiting?

Questions for Personal Application

7. What is your response to God in those areas in your life where he is making you wait? What might he be trying to teach you in this time?