

## Genesis, Part 34

Joseph is in prison, and it would be understandable if Joseph had lapsed into self-pity at this latest injustice. Once more he had been punished wrongly. He had done the right thing by rejecting the advances of Potiphar's wife. He had felt obliged to honor the trust Potiphar had placed in him and honor the relationship he had with God. But honoring the truth cost him dearly. Once more he suffered at the hands of angry and bitter liars who bore false witness against him. And once more Joseph is right where God wants him – in prison in Egypt. But God has more lessons to teach Joseph, as He matures this young Hebrew and prepares him for His work.

As I pointed out last week, this prison is not like our modern prisons, where the ACLU, Amnesty International, or the Red Cross can come to your aid. You are completely on your own and must suffer under what we would consider cruel and harsh conditions that many did not survive. Psalm 105 says of Joseph in prison, "His feet were hurt with fetters; his neck was put in a collar of iron." The Hebrew word for "hurt" implies pain and humbling. There was both physical pain associated with this and spiritual pain. "Fetters" is a binding of the feet to keep you from running away. The binding was probably chains that were perhaps too tight and certainly chafed and bruised, creating sores and lameness. They caused physical injury and pain.

But Joseph maintained his focus on the Lord. He never lost sight of God, and in that, found blessing even among the hardships. Free of the fetters and bindings, Joseph went about his business in the jail, and God blessed everything Joseph did. God gave him favor with the Jailer as seen in 39:21 And the jailor entrusted everything under Joseph's care. The jailor recognized Joseph's abilities and gave him more and more responsibilities just like Potiphar had done in his home. It is possible that Potiphar was behind some of this. Perhaps he alerted the jailer to Joseph's abilities. Perhaps it was his way of also showing mercy to Joseph, assuming he believed him and not his wife. The Lord was still very much with Joseph, and Joseph prospered even in prison. The moral of this story – the Lord

can prosper you anywhere – in slavery or even in prison. And you can learn and mature even in these same horrible conditions.

God was continuing to teach Joseph about leadership and humility, and Joseph was continuing to maintain his relationship with God and follow and trust His leading. Obedience will lead to prosperity and blessing as long you maintain your relationship with God.

Joseph still has one important lesson to learn – patience. Joseph will have to learn to wait on the Lord and that waiting will teach him patience. Under this supreme test, he will have to be patient for years and trust what God has shown him to come true. Joseph served patiently and waited on the Lord. He went about his business serving the jailor and doing what he was called to do. And the Lord prospered all that he did.

And one day Joseph was given new duties.

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

In royal households of this time with so much palace intrigue, plotting, and assassination attempts, complete and utter trustworthiness was demanded of those serving Pharaoh. Pharaoh's cupbearer ("butler" in some translations) and his chief baker have managed to offend him. The Bible doesn't say how, but it was serious enough to land them in prison. Even though the word translated as "baker" does refer to someone who bakes grain products like bread and cakes, this guy is likely the chief cook for the king.

Since poison is a common means of assassination these two must be completely trustworthy. I would conclude from all this that there was either an assassination attempt on Pharaoh or a conspiracy of one detected and

it involved poison. So Pharaoh tosses these two in prison and then evidently he investigates the matter, as we will see.

The two were placed in the care of Joseph who soon takes pity on them and demonstrates concern for them. He becomes their friend.

**Gen 40:5** 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. <sup>6</sup> When Joseph came to them in the morning, he saw that they were troubled. <sup>7</sup> So he asked Pharaoh’s officers who were with him in custody in his master’s house, “Why are your faces downcast today?” <sup>8</sup> 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.”

The cupbearer and baker have dreams that sufficiently concern them, but they don’t know how to interpret them. In those days, dreams carried much more significance than they do today. God often spoke to people in dreams. While we have the completed Canon of Scripture, they had nothing in writing from God. Dreams for us today are more likely last night’s pizza and beer doing the talking.

Joseph sees their distress. Notice how he is in tune with the distress of others and less focused on his own. He has become sensitive to the suffering of others. He remained focused on God – vertically, and that fact created a concern for those around him – horizontally. Joseph could have ignored them but he did not. Instead, he reached out to others in distress. Instead of being self-centered, he was concerned about the well-being of others.

Joseph offers to interpret the dreams. Note that he says in verse 8, “Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell them to me, please.” While he will interpret the dreams, he attributes all the credit to God. He understands that God will show him the meaning of these dreams.

## Chief Cupbearer's Dream

**Gen 40:9** So the chief cupbearer told his dream to Joseph and said to him, "In my dream there was a vine before me, <sup>10</sup> and on the vine there were three branches. As soon as it budded, its blossoms shot forth, and the clusters ripened into grapes. <sup>11</sup> 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."

Note that the grapes form naturally and the wine comes directly from the natural grape to the king's cup. The wine should be seen as pure and free of any contaminants like poison. And the cupbearer is once more serving the wine to Pharaoh.

**Gen 40:12** Then Joseph said to him, "This is its interpretation: the three branches are three days. <sup>13</sup> 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.

Joseph interprets the dream and tells the cupbearer he will be restored to his position in three days. "Lift up your head" here implies going from a downcast condition to one of restored happiness.

**Gen 40:14** 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. <sup>15</sup> 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."

Joseph is not waiting on the Lord. He pleads his case to the cupbearer and asks him to remember him to Pharaoh and the injustice he has experienced. He was stolen from his family and did nothing that should have caused him to be thrown in prison. He has indeed been treated unfairly, but all this is God's doing. Joseph was right where God wanted him because God was maturing him. But Joseph has had enough and wants out. He is failing the patience test.

**Gen 40:16** 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, <sup>17</sup> 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.” <sup>18</sup> And Joseph answered and said, “This is its interpretation: the three baskets are three days. <sup>19</sup> 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.”

Seeing that the cupbearer has gotten a positive interpretation of his dream, the baker asks to have his dream interpreted. Joseph replies that the three baskets are three days. The fact that the birds are eating what was to be Pharaoh’s suggests he won’t be serving it to Pharaoh. Joseph tells him rather bluntly that, “In three days Pharaoh will lift up your head—from you!” The word translated “lift up” is a word that means to bear or carry as in away, implying that the head of the baker will be separated from his body. He will be hanged and it seems violent enough to separate his head from his body.

**Gen 40:20** 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. <sup>21</sup> He restored the chief cupbearer to his position, and he placed the cup in Pharaoh’s hand. <sup>22</sup> But he hanged the chief baker, as Joseph had interpreted to them. <sup>23</sup> Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph but forgot him.

Pharaoh completed his investigation, and just as Joseph had interpreted, three days later Pharaoh restored the cupbearer to his position and hanged the chief baker.

Then Chapter 40 closes with this disturbing verse: “Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him.” Joseph is left in prison for another two whole years.

### **Patience**

Joseph failed the patience test when he asked the cupbearer to remember him to Pharaoh, and that cost him another two years of faith-building exercises. In the NT, James has something to say about this.

**James 1:2** Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, <sup>3</sup>for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. <sup>4</sup>And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

<sup>5</sup>If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. <sup>6</sup>But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. <sup>7</sup>For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; <sup>8</sup>he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

“And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (v. 4). “Steadfastness” is translated as “patience” in other translations. The patient believer is a mature believer – complete and lacking nothing. Or more correctly, a mature believer is a patient believer, willing to wait on the Lord’s timing in all things.

Patience requires faith. Those without faith are like the wind-blown waves of the sea tossed about by the trials and tribulations of life. In our James passage, he tells us, “A double-minded man is unstable.” Maturity demands stability in all things. God needs Joseph to be a spiritually mature believer for Him to use him as He plans to do. Joseph must learn patience, and he will. He will wait two more years in that prison before the cupbearer will remember him, and God will call him out for His purpose, two more years before Joseph finally gains the exact qualities God has been trying to build in him, two more years before Joseph will be ready. How many more years for you before God says you are ready?

### **Joseph Interprets Pharaoh’s Dreams**

Joseph has been in training as God developed his character. First, he learned humility at the hands of his brothers, then his master Potiphar, and then the jailor. Along the way he learned administration running the household of Potiphar and later his entire estate. He learned administration under the jailor while in prison. He developed a servant’s heart under his slave master Potiphar and the jailor. It manifested itself when he befriended the cupbearer and the baker.

He learned to wait on God. All along he kept his focus on God and, with one exception recorded in Scripture, he kept his faith in God. That one time is when he trusted in the cupbearer to plead his case before Pharaoh. For that error, God kept him in training for two more years.

But now Joseph is ready to get off the bench and get into the game. He has been trained and conditioned to be the instrument through whom God will work, not only in Egypt but in preserving the Hebrew race. The little uppity kid born to privilege, loved by his father, and hated by his brothers is about to become the means through which God will preserve His chosen people. But first, we have to deal with getting Joseph out of prison – off the bench and into the game.

Joseph still languishing in prison and still experiencing undeserved suffering for things he did not do, two long and agonizing years experiencing the harsh conditions of a primitive Egyptian prison and all the suffering associated with that. Sure, he has responsibilities in prison, which he is executing faithfully, and that probably brings him some measure of relief from the harsh conditions of prison life. At least he has something constructive to do. But Joseph wakes up every morning knowing two things:

- First – he is there unjustly, a completely unfair punishment. That is something very hard to live with.
- Secondly – he is not free. We cherish freedom. Imagine having it taken away unfairly. Imagine also that except for God, there is no one to turn to. No attorney, no judge, nothing.

Joseph has nothing by way of human assurance that this will end someday. For all he knows, he will die there. He only knows he trusts God to see him through this trial and, if prison is what God wants for Joseph, he has become reconciled to that fact. But God has other plans for Joseph.

**Genesis 41:1** After two whole years, Pharaoh dreamed that he was standing by the Nile, <sup>2</sup> and behold, there came up out of the Nile seven cows, attractive and plump, and they fed in the reed grass. <sup>3</sup> And behold, seven other cows, ugly and thin, came up out of the Nile after them, and stood by the other cows on the bank of the Nile. <sup>4</sup> And the ugly, thin cows ate up the seven attractive, plump cows. And Pharaoh awoke.

<sup>5</sup> And he fell asleep and dreamed a second time. And behold, seven ears of grain, plump and good, were growing on one stalk. <sup>6</sup> And behold, after them sprouted seven ears, thin and blighted by the east wind. <sup>7</sup> And the thin ears swallowed up the seven plump, full ears. And Pharaoh awoke, and behold, it was a dream. <sup>8</sup> So in the morning his spirit was troubled, and he sent and called for all the magicians of Egypt and all its wise men. Pharaoh told them his dreams, but none could interpret them to Pharaoh.

Pharaoh knows there is something in these dreams he needs to understand. “His spirit was troubled.” The word means to be beaten or troubled, suggesting that Pharaoh was very upset over this dream. It nagged at him, and he knew he must find a way to interpret its meaning because he was sure its meaning had great significance.

So, he “called for all the magicians of Egypt and all its wise men...” These are two different kinds of people:

- **Magicians** were men who dabbled in the black arts and were in contact with the spirit world – demons. They were priests, warlocks, soothsayers, palm readers, shamans, mediums, spiritualists, diviners of the occult, and not in a good sense, spiritualists.
- **Wise men** on the other hand were learned men, mainly elders with worldly experience who were able to apply that experience and draw conclusions that might have some validity. These might be likened to presidential advisors, smart learned people to whom the president would go for advice.

“Pharaoh told them his dreams, but there was none who could interpret them to Pharaoh” (v. 8). None could interpret the dreams, not the wise and learned men of Egypt or even those whose job it was to interpret dreams, the “magicians”.

**Gen 41:9** Then the chief cupbearer said to Pharaoh, “I remember my offenses today. <sup>10</sup> When Pharaoh was angry with his servants and put me and the chief baker in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, <sup>11</sup> we dreamed on the same night, he and I, each having a dream with its own interpretation.



The cupbearer spoke up and said, “I remember my offense today...” “Offense” translated as “faults” in other versions is sometimes translated as “sins”. The cupbearer thinks of his failure to remember Joseph until now as a severe fault. Joseph befriended him in prison, and helped him, and what did he do when he was released and restored just like Joseph said he would be? Nothing. He forgot about Joseph. He is probably a little perplexed that he had forgotten someone who had so succored him while in prison.

The Hebrew word translated “I remember,” in the stem it is used in, means to be caused to remember. Does he mean this incident prompted him to remember or did God prompt him? The cupbearer probably means the incident prompted his memory, but the writer, Moses, probably means God did the providential act of reminding the cupbearer some two years after Joseph asked him to remember him to Pharaoh.

All along God has been in control of Joseph’s circumstances, and He has done so for Joseph’s good. God caused the cupbearer to forget about Joseph, because Joseph and the circumstances that would make Joseph needed and significant were not yet in place, and Joseph also needed to learn a bit more patience. Had the cupbearer remembered Joseph two years before and brought him and the amazing story of how he interpreted dreams accurately to Pharaoh’s attention, Joseph would have been nothing more than a novelty like the occult magicians in Pharaoh’s court. Instead of a novelty, Joseph is about to become a national treasure. God works all things together for good, but that needs to be on His timing.

The cupbearer goes on to describe the incident that took place two years before.

**Gen 41:12** A young Hebrew was there with us, a servant of the captain of the guard. When we told him, he interpreted our dreams to us, giving an interpretation to each man according to his dream. <sup>13</sup> And as he interpreted to us, so it came about. I was restored to my office, and the baker was hanged.”

The cupbearer describes the incident and how accurate Joseph's interpretation of the dreams was. Pharaoh was impressed. Out of options since his regular sources had failed him, he sent for Joseph.

**Gen 41:14** Then Pharaoh sent and called Joseph, and they quickly brought him out of the pit. And when he had shaved himself and changed his clothes, he came in before Pharaoh. <sup>15</sup> And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I have had a dream, and there is no one who can interpret it. I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it."

Joseph was brought "quickly" to Pharaoh. There is a sense of urgency here. Pharaoh is perplexed and a perplexed Pharaoh is a dangerous Pharaoh. Notice what Joseph did: he shaved and changed clothes. He could have come as he was. After all, it wasn't Joseph's fault he was dirty and wearing rags, but he shaved and changed clothes. Egyptians were clean shaven, face and head. Joseph shaved both. He changed clothes, and it is believed he took on the dress of the Egyptians. Paul has something to say about what Joseph's doing in First Corinthians.

**1 Cor 9:19** For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. <sup>20</sup> To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. <sup>21</sup> To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. <sup>22</sup> To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. <sup>23</sup> I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings

Paul did not put emphasis on himself but rather on the message. Paul tried to blend in to the extent that he did not compromise his moral principles. Joseph is doing the same thing. He has learned his lessons. He is humble. He is not seeking to draw attention to himself, because he clearly understands his power is not of himself, and he wishes to give credit where credit is due.

Pharaoh says he understands Joseph can interpret dreams.

**Gen 41:16** Joseph answered Pharaoh, “It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer.”

Joseph replies that he has no power but that which is given to him by God. “I can’t interpret dreams but ‘God can and will give Pharaoh a favorable answer.’” “An answer” in the Hebrew means to testify or give witness. The idea is to give a sincere and truthful answer that can be trusted.

“Favorable” is the Hebrew word shalom, which is used primarily in greeting and usually as a blessing as in wishing peace and prosperity on the one so greeted. Here it carries more of a connotation of completeness in the sense the interpretation of the dream will be complete and understandable such that Pharaoh will feel at peace with its accuracy. Which he will do even though the prophecy contained in the dream is a dreadful one and would hardly be considered something that would bring peace to a non-believer like Pharaoh.

### **Pharaoh recounts his dreams to Joseph**

**Gen 41:17** Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Behold, in my dream I was standing on the banks of the Nile. <sup>18</sup> Seven cows, plump and attractive, came up out of the Nile and fed in the reed grass. <sup>19</sup> Seven other cows came up after them, poor and very ugly and thin, such as I had never seen in all the land of Egypt. <sup>20</sup> And the thin, ugly cows ate up the first seven plump cows, <sup>21</sup> but when they had eaten them no one would have known that they had eaten them, for they were still as ugly as at the beginning. Then I awoke. <sup>22</sup> I also saw in my dream seven ears growing on one stalk, full and good. <sup>23</sup> Seven ears, withered, thin, and blighted by the east wind, sprouted after them, <sup>24</sup> and the thin ears swallowed up the seven good ears. And I told it to the magicians, but there was no one who could explain it to me.”

<sup>25</sup> Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, “The dreams of Pharaoh are one; God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do. <sup>26</sup> The seven good cows are seven years, and the seven good ears are seven years; the dreams are one. <sup>27</sup> The seven lean and ugly cows that came up after

them are seven years, and the seven empty ears blighted by the east wind are also seven years of famine. <sup>28</sup> It is as I told Pharaoh; God has shown to Pharaoh what he is about to do. <sup>29</sup> There will come seven years of great plenty throughout all the land of Egypt, <sup>30</sup> but after them there will arise seven years of famine, and all the plenty will be forgotten in the land of Egypt. The famine will consume the land, <sup>31</sup> and the plenty will be unknown in the land by reason of the famine that will follow, for it will be very severe. <sup>32</sup> And the doubling of Pharaoh's dream means that the thing is fixed by God, and God will shortly bring it about.

Joseph interprets the dreams as God told him. "God has revealed to Pharaoh what He is about to do." He had to reveal His plan through two people. If Joseph alone had the dream and the interpretation, Pharaoh would not have listened or heeded the warning. Pharaoh had to be part of the process and be worried about its meaning to believe an answer from God's designated hitter. This is all the providential actions of God. Bob Thieme would say, "Jesus Christ controls history." We still make free will choices within the sovereign context of God's control.

Joseph tells Pharaoh that seven years of "plenty" are coming, in which the harvests will be bountiful, but following that will be seven years of famine, "and the plenty will be forgotten". The famine will be worse than bad. "It will consume the land." The word "consume" refers to complete devastation. There is no avoiding these seven years of famine. He says, "And the doubling of Pharaoh's dream means that the thing is fixed by God, and God will shortly bring it about" (v. 32). – the 14 years are about to start. Joseph continues and suggests how Pharaoh should deal with this problem.

**Gen 41:33** Now therefore let Pharaoh select a discerning and wise man, and set him over the land of Egypt. <sup>34</sup> Let Pharaoh proceed to appoint overseers over the land and take one-fifth of the produce of the land of Egypt during the seven plentiful years. <sup>35</sup> And let them gather all the food of these good years that are coming and store up grain under the authority of Pharaoh for food in the cities, and let them keep it. <sup>36</sup> That food shall be a reserve for the land against the seven years of famine that are to occur in the land of Egypt, so that the land may not perish through the famine."

Joseph has had extensive training as a servant and as an administrator. Here is that training coming out. Joseph knows this plan to store and ration food will not work without an able administrator – “a discerning and wise man”. Was he promoting himself? I don’t think so because Joseph has been a prisoner in Pharaoh’s prison for the last few years, so why would he think that Pharaoh would promote someone from the lowest position in Egypt to such an extremely high one? Joseph is a very humble person at this point and is expressing an understanding based on his personal experience.

Pharaoh listens and heeds...

### **Joseph Rises to Power**

**Gen 41:37** This proposal pleased Pharaoh and all his servants. <sup>38</sup> And Pharaoh said to his servants, “Can we find a man like this, in whom is the Spirit of God?”

Note the qualifying requirement for success in this plan – a man “in whom is the Spirit of God”. Pharaoh is probably setting up his court for what he is about to do. He believes that Joseph has an inside track to God – just as Potiphar and the jailor understood. Joseph has an honest witness before men that he is a man of God, and the Spirit of God is with him.

The question arises: does Pharaoh now believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? I don’t think that is what the text is saying. I believe the implication is that Pharaoh believes that Joseph has a connection with some god, one who is obviously powerful. However, by elimination, that can mean the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

**Gen 41:39** Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Since God has shown you all this, there is none so discerning and wise as you are. <sup>40</sup> You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command. Only as regards the throne will I be greater than you.” <sup>41</sup> And Pharaoh said to Joseph, “See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt.” <sup>42</sup> Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph’s hand, and clothed him in garments of fine linen and put a gold

chain about his neck. <sup>43</sup> And he made him ride in his second chariot. And they called out before him, “Bow the knee!” Thus he set him over all the land of Egypt. <sup>44</sup> Moreover, Pharaoh said to Joseph, “I am Pharaoh, and without your consent no one shall lift up hand or foot in all the land of Egypt.” <sup>45</sup> And Pharaoh called Joseph’s name Zaphenath-paneah. And he gave him in marriage Asenath, the daughter of Potiphara priest of On. So Joseph went out over the land of Egypt.

Once more, God has managed in great detail the “all things” of Joseph’s life, and God, not Pharaoh, promoted him over all of Egypt second only to Pharaoh himself. Once more God has Joseph right where He wants him – right where he needs to be to be used by God to further His own plan for the Hebrews and ultimately all of mankind.

Joseph has gone from a position of authority within his own household back in the land of Canaan to a position he was not at that time prepared to hold, in which he was somewhat clumsy in administering his authority. His brothers hated him, plotted his death, and sold him into slavery, and he ended up in Egypt far from his family, his home, and anything he knew except God.

Once a slave in the household of Potiphar, Joseph went from this low position to one of great authority. Unfairly accused of attempted rape he was sentenced to what in most cases amounted to a death sentence in an Egyptian prison. And even there, just as he had done in Potiphar’s household, he served God and kept his focus not on his circumstances but on the author of his circumstances. Joseph kept his faith.

He had one failing while in prison and that was attempting to swap his timing for God’s timing. God in effect said, “NO – two more years for you! Then you will be ready. Then I will be ready to use you to do mighty and wondrous things.”

Now Joseph is in a position of great authority in Egypt and during a time in history that will be significant for both Egypt and his own Hebrew kin.