

From Prisoner to Prime Minister

Genesis 40 and 41

This story revolves around dreams and their meanings. In the Bible God often speaks to people through dreams – why do you think this is? Only a small percentage of dreams contain a divine message. Sometimes a verbal message is given in a dream (see Matthew 1 v 20; 27 v 19); or dreams with vivid imagery are interpreted by a prophet (see for example Numbers 12 v 6; Daniel 1 v 17; Joel 2 v 28 – quoted by Peter on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2 v 17 and 18). On some occasions prophets receive visions, which they then interpret (see Isaiah 1 v 1; Obadiah 1 v 1; Zechariah 1 v 8). This story begins with Joseph in prison, and two of his fellow prisoners, the cup-bearer and the baker, having dreams. “We both had dreams... but there is no one to interpret them.” Joseph is quick to respond: “Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell me your dreams”...

The cup-bearer and the baker (Genesis 40)

A cup-bearer was an important person. He provided the wine that the king drank, and he always drank some of the wine before he gave it to the king, to show there was no poison in it. So the cup-bearer was always near to the king. The king trusted him. The cup-bearer might even give advice to the king, as he did in Genesis 41 v 9-13. We can be sure that Joseph often talked with the cup-bearer in the prison. So Joseph heard many things about Pharaoh and about his court. That was a part of God’s plan. God was preparing Joseph for his future work...

- As you read this story, what admirable qualities do you find in Joseph’s character? There are at least five...
- How did God make Joseph’s prison experiences work together for good? Why were victory over temptation, and the use of opportunities to prove God and to help others, so important at this stage?

How Joseph’s hopes must have been raised when the cup-bearer eventually left the prison to return to Pharaoh’s service. In verses 14 and 15 we read of Joseph’s appeal to the cup-bearer to remember him, and to do something about getting him out of the dungeon. Alas, the frailty of human nature! The cup-bearer was restored to his former position, but he soon forgot about Joseph. Sometimes, when you are banking on somebody’s help or assistance, that person will let you down. But Joseph did not altogether despair, because “the Lord was with him.” The arm of flesh may fail you, but JESUS never fails... But Joseph’s life was not altogether black. The break came suddenly in the end, when perhaps he had begun to give up hope of ever leaving prison. What followed must have surpassed his wildest dreams...

Pharaoh’s dreams (Genesis 41)

- What was it about Joseph that so impressed Pharaoh and his court that he was made ruler of Egypt?
- Given that the Egyptians believed in many gods, and that Pharaoh was himself regarded as a god, what was particularly courageous about Joseph’s reply in verse 16?
- Joseph experienced sudden promotion to great responsibility and leadership. He was perhaps the most powerful man in the known world. The higher one gets in this world, the stronger will be the temptation to take the credit for one’s position. How did Joseph handle power, and how was he able to do this? What are the lessons for us in our day?

Prayer – Lord, as we look again at the life of Joseph, help us to learn from his example of integrity, humility, practicality and service. As we look to you, help us to be humble servants, loving you first and our neighbours second. Amen.