

Genesis 39:20-40:23
Joseph and his adventures in prison
Christ Church Liverpool

You know you've got to have hope, you know you've got to be strong. Does anybody know why, according to Gabrielle way back when in 1993, you have to have hope and be strong? Because dreams can come true.

That is a sentiment that the cup-bearer, but perhaps not the baker, in our story might agree with! And it's an idea that Joseph might not be very happy with either. It was dreams that had got Joseph into his situation in the first place. Some 10 years before the events recorded here in Genesis 40, Joseph had two dreams. In both of these dreams he ended up as the leader of his family, with his brothers, and even his parents, bowing before him.

When he recounted the dreams to his brothers it enraged them so much that they wickedly sold him into slavery and Joseph landed in Egypt, in the house of a man called Potiphar, the captain of the Pharaoh's guard. That was not so bad; he got on well with Potiphar. Potiphar's wife, however, can only really be described as a bit obsessive! When Joseph refused to sleep with her she accused him of rape and had him thrown into prison. The whole thing started with a couple of dreams.

You could have forgiven Joseph for being a bit fed up with dreams! But he is not finished with them yet. Both in this chapter and the next one dreams are extremely important in Joseph's life. That would have been no surprise to the ancient Egyptians or, indeed, to people in most ancient cultures and many places in the world today. The Egyptians considered that dreams were an important means of communication between people and the world of the gods. And the dreams experienced by the cup-bearer and the baker do indeed turn out to reveal God's plans for them.

For us, however, the point of this passage is not a lesson in how to interpret your dreams. It's not even that we should expect God to speak to us in dreams, though he's perfectly able to do that if he wishes. Instead this passage is here to teach us about what it looks like to be God's servant. We are going to look at three things about God's servant that we learn from the life of Joseph, that find their fulfilment in the Lord Jesus Christ and that have important implications for you and me this morning.

Three things about God's servant that we learn from the life of Joseph, that find their fulfilment in the Lord Jesus Christ and that have important implications for you and me this morning.

- **God's servant suffers unjustly – Joseph, Jesus, you?**

The starting point for this whole story is that Joseph, locked up in an Egyptian jail, is innocent. Sure you can say that he might have been a bit foolish to talk to his brothers about the dreams he had experienced where Joseph was made their ruler. But he had done nothing to deserve being sold into slavery.

And he had certainly done nothing to deserve being thrown into prison by his master Potiphar. Quite the opposite in fact; when Potiphar's wife had tried to seduce Joseph he had emphasised that he would not sleep with her because he thought it would be a terrible sin to wrong Potiphar by committing adultery with his wife.

In this chapter, for the first time, we hear from Joseph's own lips his sense of the injustice that has been perpetrated against him. Have a look at v15: *"I was forcibly carried off from the land of the Hebrews, and even here I have done nothing to deserve being put into a dungeon."*

Joseph is not bitter about his fate. He doesn't seem to take the opportunity to complain about his brothers or his former master. But Joseph is profoundly conscious that what has happened to him is unjust.

The injustice of his situation seems to be compounded in this story by three things.

Firstly there is a contrast with the other prisoners. The cupbearer and the baker, the passage says, had "offended" Pharaoh. That makes it sound like they might have been a little bit rude to him and he overreacted! Actually the Hebrew word here is that they had "sinned against" Pharaoh.

A cupbearer and a baker were two of the most important people in the royal court. They had direct access to Pharaoh's food and drink and would have been required to sample it to make sure that it was not poisoned. These men's jobs involved some of the closest personal relationships enjoyed by any human being with the most powerful man in the world, who was considered to be divine. For them to sin against him was a very serious crime. They were sent to the prison to await trial and sentence.

Joseph, of course, was innocent. And it must have rubbed salt into the wound to be assigned as a prison slave to the baker, an official of Pharaoh, who was guilty of a very serious crime.

The second thing that must have emphasised to Joseph the unfairness of the situation was the role played by Potiphar. It was Potiphar, remember, who had sent him to prison in the first place. It's true that Potiphar probably could have had Joseph put to death. But it must still have hurt that his former master, who had trusted Joseph with everything, put him in jail. And who was it who assigned the care of the cupbearer and the baker to Joseph? The captain of the guard – Potiphar! The old boss assigns the innocent to serve the guilty. Since Potiphar was in charge of the prison Joseph probably saw him from time to time. And as months turned into years that must have been a constant and painful reminder of his innocence.

The third thing in this story that multiplies the injustice of his position is the fact that after Joseph has successfully interpreted the dream to the cupbearer, after he has asked him to remember and show kindness. After the cupbearer has got his job back and returned to the centre of political power in the land what happens? The cupbearer did not remember Joseph, he forgot him. Joseph wouldn't have known that of course. He would have just stayed in jail. Wondering if the cupbearer had said something and Pharaoh had ignored it. Wondering whether, any day soon, the scroll might arrive that would bring his freedom. Waiting, waiting, waiting...

Everything in this story screams about the injustice of Joseph's situation. All he had sought to do was serve God and the result was suffering.

In this, of course, as in so much else, Joseph sets forth for us a shadow of a servant who suffered much more. Jesus Christ was not only unjustly imprisoned but unjustly executed. Imagine the pain for Jesus of hearing the crowd clamour for the release of Barabbas, a notorious rebel, at the cost of Christ going to the cross. Imagine the feeling of injustice as Peter lied, denied even knowing Jesus, and escaped while Jesus told the truth that he was God's Messiah and was condemned as a liar. Jesus died because Judas betrayed him, his disciples deserted him, the Pharisees conspired against him and Pilate decided Jesus was not a politically winnable cause.

Joseph points us to Jesus, the servant of God who suffers unjustly.

But Joseph doesn't just point us to Jesus. It's true that Joseph is the shadow and Jesus is the climax of the story. But the story doesn't end with Jesus. It continues today. It continues with all those of us who consider ourselves to be God's servants, followers of Jesus, Christians.

God's servant will suffer unjustly. That applies to us to. After all, as Jesus says, no servant is greater than

his master. If they persecuted him, which they did, they will persecute us too. God's servant can expect to suffer unjustly. At the moment, of course, unlike Christian believers in Yemen, Iran, Iraq, India, Turkey, China, the Maldives, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, North Korea and almost any country ending in "stan" the unjust suffering we face for being a Christian is rarely physical abuse – though I'm sure there's a good bit of that going on if we asked school children who are Christians.

But there is plenty of ridicule, abuse and discrimination; whether it's against wearing a cross at work, praying for a patient or suggesting that the entire universe and all the life in it did not appear by chance from nothing (how ridiculous not to believe that!).

Most persecution of Christians though, comes not when we reject the atheist version of evolution but when we stand with integrity for what is morally right. For not sleeping with someone we are not married to, for not condoning homosexual practice as morally right, for not fiddling our expenses and making everyone else look bad.

God's servant suffers unjustly.

- **God's servant is not forgotten – Joseph, Jesus, you?**

This passage starts and ends with a similarity and a contrast. The similarity is that Joseph, despite all his efforts, is in the same place at the end of the story that he is at the beginning. He may have got promoted to running the prison. He may have accurately interpreted the dreams of Pharaoh's senior servants. But he is still in prison. Doesn't that make it look like he has been forgotten?

The contrast is that whereas at the beginning of the passage we are told that God was with Joseph at the end of the passage we are told that the cupbearer forgot him. Surely that makes it explicit that Joseph **has** been forgotten?

Well no. Despite the terrible situation in which Joseph finds himself. Despite the miserable time he must have had when the cupbearer was released but Joe languished in the slammer for two more years the whole story makes clear, again and again, that Joseph has NOT been forgotten.

We are told right at the beginning that the Lord is with Joseph. God gives him signs of that presence as Joseph is once more promoted as high up the ladder of the prison world as he possibly can be; he's more or less in charge of the place!

God brings to Joseph two men from right at the centre of royal power in Egypt. He does not know it yet but it is his connection with the cupbearer that will be absolutely instrumental in ensuring that by the end of the next chapter he is not only out of prison but has been made Prime Minister of the entire nation! And God reveals to Joseph exactly what the dreams meant so he can interpret them correctly.

Yes it does look, to the casual observer, as if Joseph has been abandoned to his fate by an uncaring providence. But the reality is that the Lord is with him.

When Jesus Christ died on a Roman cross he spoke seven phrases. Arguably the most famous were these: "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Jesus Christ was abandoned, in a way that Joseph never was, so that our sin could be forgiven. He was cut off from the divine favour so that people like you and I, who do not deserve God's blessing, could receive it.

But we mustn't let that make us think that Jesus Christ was forgotten. He was never abandoned in that sense. It wasn't that an uncaring providence ignored Jesus for a bit and then suddenly thought "oh yes I'd better do something about that." Jesus was no innocent third party, momentarily off God's radar or, worse, smitten by an angry God because he was a convenient target.

God's Son was never forgotten. Throughout the terrible events of the trial, flogging, cross carrying, crucifixion, darkness and death Jesus and his Father were carrying out together the plan they had conceived together before time began. Christ took God's judgment for sin on behalf of everybody who trusts him. But he was never forgotten.

Because of Jesus Christ nobody here this morning ever has to experience the eternal agony of judgment. If we put our confidence in what Jesus did there is absolute certainty of God's blessing.

Sometimes it may not look like it. Sometimes we experience extreme trials; exhaustion, depression, sickness and grief. Often in this life it looks like there is no light at the end of the tunnel. That was, no doubt, how it seemed for Joseph who has moved from the pit where his brothers out him for a few hours to a pit where he is imprisoned for years.

But we know from Joseph's story that he was not forgotten. We know from the evidence of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead that he

was not forgotten. And we know that because they were not forgotten by God we will not be either.

If, this morning, you feel that the Lord is distant, that he has abandoned you, that you have been forgotten you ought to talk to somebody about that. Please, please get one of the church leaders, staff or a friend to pray that through with you. Please to not leave here today without seeking their help. And know, this morning, that God has not forgotten you. It may feel to you like he has. It probably felt to Joseph that he had. But, unlike the cupbearer, God always remembers his people.

- **God's servant announces salvation and judgment – Joseph, Jesus, you?**

We come, lastly, to the heart of the events of this chapter.

It was well known in Egypt that dreams not only often revealed to people important information about their futures but that interpreting them was a highly specialist skill requiring years of training. So you can imagine why, v7, that morning as Joseph brought a full-Egyptian breakfast in to the baker and the cupbearer, they were so miserable. They looked like a wet weekend in Morecambe.

These two men were at a critical point in their lives. It's hard to imagine any point in your life at which you'd rather have a glimpse into the future than when awaiting trial and sentencing for a major crime. And yet, for these two men, this was the one time when they were separated from the dream interpreting specialists who they would normally have been able to consult because of their privileged position in the court. The one time you REALLY need a dream interpreter and you can't get one!

Fortunately for them Joseph is a man who understands reality. Joseph knows, v8, that understanding of dreams isn't really the province of astrologers or even psychiatrists but of God, who alone sees both the visible world of our sense and the unseen spiritual world that lies beyond our grasp.

Something about Joseph seems to have impressed the cupbearer, or perhaps he was just sufficiently desperate to give this untested Hebrew a chance, so he tells his dream... It's a dream full of threes... Three branches which do three things (bud, blossom and ripen). Three actions by the cupbearer (taking, squeezing and putting). It's a dream, Joseph reveals, of salvation. A dream that tells that the cupbearer will be found to be innocent and restored to his place at Pharaoh's side.

Emboldened by the cupbearer's braveness, and probably seeing some parallels with his own dream the baker now speaks up. His dream too a three – three baskets of bread. Apparently Egyptian lists from the time describe over 50 types of bread (and you thought Subway was confusing!). But these delicacies do not describe great abundance and blessing for the baker.

Although the interpretation starts the same – Pharaoh will lift his head, instead of being lifted up, an expression of honour, it will be lifted off – a picture of execution. The bread represents not great abundance for the baker but his own flesh which will be exposed after he has been hanged, a better translation would be impaled, for his crimes.

And, of course, what Joseph announces is exactly what happens. Now it would, I guess, be easy to think that the content of the dreams here is more or less irrelevant. And, if you listen many of the thousands of sermons available on the internet on this passage, the content might as well be irrelevant. What seems to matter to many people is nothing more than that the dreams, as Gabrielle might have said, come true.

Now don't get me wrong. It is vital to the story that the dreams come true; not least because that reminds us that we are still waiting for Joseph's own dream, that he will be anointed as the head over his family, to come true.

But what is in the dreams matters as well. Because what God's servant is announcing here is not just random stuff. Joseph isn't predicting that Jose Mourinho will win the Champions League with Real Madrid next season or the winner of Britain's Got Talent or some other triviality. He is talking about life and death. He is prophesying salvation and judgment at the hands of the king. He is announcing the future destinies of men.

That's why it's particularly important what happens to the baker. He isn't just killed. His body is left exposed for the birds to eat rather than being embalmed in the traditional Egyptian way. This was to ensure that his soul was not able to make a journey into the afterlife. From an Egyptian point of view Joseph was saying that the baker was going to be eternally cursed. He was announcing not just death but judgment.

That will become particularly important as the story unfolds – though you'll have to come back next week for the details because they aren't explained till the next chapter.

But it is in this aspect that Joseph here most significantly foreshadows Jesus Christ. Because Christ too came to announce judgment and salvation.

Have you ever wondered why, with the ability to heal anybody he met Jesus of Nazareth deliberately chose not to spend his time doing something that would have totally solved the equivalent of the NHS budget crisis of his day (not that it would have done much for CCL because having no sick people would leave most of you unemployed!). Why did Jesus deliberately, and literally turn his back on healing in Capernaum and, as Mark 1:38 tells us, say that he had come, instead to preach?

Of course it can only be because Jesus believed that what he had to say was more important than the miracles he could perform.

What Jesus had to say was that the day of judgment and salvation is coming. He came to declare the nearness of the kingdom of God. Not just the individual destinies of this man or that but the eternal fates of everyone. Jesus announced that we have all, like the baker, sinned against the king and that the only way to avoid a punishment much worse than his is to put our trust in him.

And that is true for us too. God's servants are here, Christians are left in this sorry and messed up world to declare that God's salvation and judgment are coming.

Unlike Joseph it is not revealed to us specifically which individuals will face God's wrath on the final day. But we do know, and are called to declare, that humankind faces God's wrath and that all who do not actively and consciously put their trust in Christ face God's just condemnation.

To announce salvation and judgment we do not have to rely on a dream from God. Indeed the entire New Testament records only two instances of God speaking to people through a dream. And both those dreams were given to Christian people to tell them to take to new groups of people the message of God's coming salvation and judgment that they already knew.

You and I do not have to wait for someone to come and ask us to interpret their dreams, their philosophy or their fears before we can tell them what is going to happen to them. All we have to do is re-announce to a new audience the message Jesus has already brought.

In just a few short days, the King's reckoning is coming. We don't know if it's three days, or three thousand. But we know that day IS coming. We know that when God visits us in the person of his son Jesus Christ the guilty will face judgment. We know that when Christ returns all who have trusted in him will have their heads lifted up to honour and glory because of him.

God's servant suffers unjustly. God's servant is not forgotten. God's servant announces judgment and salvation. Each of those three truths from the life of Joseph is great news for me and you this morning. Because each of those truths is fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ. He suffered unjustly to pay for your sins and mine. He was not forgotten in the grave but gloriously resurrected to life. And he announced salvation and judgment so that you and I can know how to share in that resurrection, how to gain eternal life, simply by putting our trust in Jesus.

These three truths, foreshadowed in the life of Joseph, are great news for us this morning. They mean that if you have never put your faith in Christ, if you have never trusted him for forgiveness you really need to do that right now, because the day of salvation and judgment is coming.

The facts that God's servant suffers unjustly, is not forgotten and announces salvation and judgment are also challenging. Because they ought also to be true of everyone here this morning who calls themselves a follower of Jesus.

Is our expectation that people will respect us for our Christian faith? Some may. But the testimony of Joseph's life and of centuries of church history and, most of all, the teaching of Jesus is that a life lived following him and holding to his words is more likely to lead to unjust suffering.

And when such unjust suffering, or even the normal trials of life in a messed up and fallen world, comes, do we act and speak as if we have been forgotten by God? We may feel that his blessing is distant. We may well cry out to him in our lack of understanding at our suffering. But we ought also to be careful. Because even Christ, who was forsaken by his Father, bearing his judgment so that we do not have to, was not forgotten. So neither will you be.

Finally I wonder if a lot of the time I have not fully grasped that my role as God's servant in the world, as a follower of Jesus, is not simply to keep my head down and not do really wicked things but to declare God's salvation and judgment. Joseph was a servant to the baker and the cupbearer. But he did not hesitate to tell them the truth about the king's judgment. Let's pray that we would share his boldness this week.

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