



Genesis - Chapter Forty

II. Genesis 11:27-50:26 - Patriarchal History (continues)

II.c Genesis 37:1-50:26 - Jacob's Descendants (continues)

Summary of Chapter Forty

Joseph's fellow prisoners include the chief baker and cupbearer of Pharaoh. Both men have dreams that they cannot interpret but, through God, Joseph does so. His interpretation is that the baker will be executed within three days but that the cupbearer would be restored to his former position at that same time. Both dreams come true. Joseph had asked the cupbearer to remember him when he was released but he did not do so for some considerable time.

II.c.iv Genesis 40:1-23 - The Dreams of Two Prisoners

The events recorded in this chapter take place some time after Joseph's imprisonment began. Two senior royal attendants are imprisoned for offending Pharaoh. With God's help, Joseph interprets their dreams, predicting that one of them will be reinstated but the other put to death. These events prepare the way for Joseph to be later summoned from prison to interpret Pharaoh's dreams.

¹ Some time after this, the cupbearer of the king of Egypt and his baker offended their lord the king of Egypt.

Genesis 40:1

Offended their lord. In 39:9 the same Hebrew verb is translated 'sin against.' In contrast to Joseph, who refused to sin against God, the cupbearer and baker have sinned against their lord who, as the king of Egypt, enjoyed divine status. The repetition of the rarely used expression king of Egypt emphasises the seriousness of their offense.

The primary duties of the cupbearer and baker, as their titles suggest, were to provide the king with drink and food, respectively; as royal attendants they had unique access to him, and they were trusted to keep him from being poisoned. Although the offence is not specified most commentators believe it is likely that the baker had tried to poison Pharaoh either intentionally or negligently. Nehemiah had served as cupbearer to the king of Persia in Susa (Nehemiah 1:11).

² Pharaoh was angry with his two officers, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker, ³ and he put them in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, in the prison where Joseph was confined.

Genesis 40:2-3

His two officers. The Hebrew terms *saris* and *sar* used to denote the status of the chief cupbearer and the chief baker are identical to those used of Potiphar in 37:36 and 39:1.

The captain of the guard. This same title is given to Potiphar in 37:36 and 39:1. Since Potiphar's name is not used in this context, however, the captain is almost certainly another person.

⁴ The captain of the guard charged Joseph with them, and he waited on them; and they continued for some time in custody.

Genesis 40:4

The captain of the guard charged Joseph with them. The narrator continues to observe parallels between Joseph's experience in prison and what happened in Potiphar's house (39:4). In prison, as in Potiphar's house, Joseph waited on a captain of the guard and was appointed to manage the affairs of his house.

Although Joseph had a position of high authority in the prison he did not use it to make others serve him. He used his high position to serve others: <<So the last will be first, and the first will be last>> (Matthew 20:16).

⁵ 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 meaning. ⁶ When Joseph came to them in the morning, he saw that they were troubled. ⁷ So he asked Pharaoh's officers, who were with him in custody in his master's house, 'Why are your faces downcast today?' ⁸ 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.'

Genesis 40:5-8

In the ancient Near East, dreams were often viewed as a medium of divine revelation. However, because of their imprisonment, the cupbearer and the baker no longer have access to the magicians and wise men who might have been able to provide an interpretation, although they could not do so when Pharaoh had his dreams (41:8).

When Joseph came to them in the morning, he saw that they were troubled. This is a window into the heart of Joseph. Men who are consumed with anger and bitterness do not often take a concern for the personal problems of others like this.

Why are your faces downcast today? It would be easy, perhaps technically true, for Joseph to think that because of all the wrong done against him, everything should centre on his own feelings and hurts. Instead, he cared that the cupbearer and the baker looked so sad one day.

This is one of the keys to living like Jesus: being an others-centred person. Joseph could have justified certain self-centeredness in his life, i.e. an ‘I have to take care of myself right now’ approach, but he did not.

Joseph’s question, Do not interpretations belong to God? recalls his own experience of dreams and supports the general principle that: <<*The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the revealed things belong to us and to our children for ever, to observe all the words of this law*>> (Deuteronomy 29:29). Many generations later, Daniel, another exiled Hebrew, also interpreted dreams in a foreign context as recorded in Daniel 2:25-45 and 4:19-27.

Please tell them to me. This was not a case of mere discussion of dreams for the sake of curiosity or a form of fortune telling. Joseph saw that these men were clearly disturbed by their dreams, and approached the dreams from a desire to speak into their troubled souls.

⁹ So the chief cupbearer told his dream to Joseph, and said to him, ‘In my dream there was a vine before me, ¹⁰ and on the vine there were three branches. As soon as it budded, its blossoms came out and the clusters ripened into grapes. ¹¹ 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.’

Genesis 40:9-11

In my dream there was a vine before me. This dream was from God, who used figures and pictures that made sense to the butler: a vine, grapes, and serving the wine to Pharaoh.

Not only does the cupbearer's dream mention three branches, but the related activities are grouped in threes.

Pharaoh's cup was in my hand. In his dream, the butler saw himself serve the Pharaoh again, restored to his former position.

¹² Then Joseph said to him, 'This is its interpretation: the three branches are three days; ¹³ within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your office; and you shall place Pharaoh's cup in his hand, just as you used to do when you were his cupbearer. ¹⁴ But remember me when it is well with you; please do me the kindness to make mention of me to Pharaoh, and so get me out of this place. ¹⁵ For in fact I was stolen out of the land of the Hebrews; and here also I have done nothing that they should have put me into the dungeon.'

Genesis 40:12-15

Joseph perceives that the three branches symbolise three days. The observation that Pharaoh will lift up your head introduces a motif that reappears in vv.19-20. Joseph's interpretation of this dream came from God, not from his own wisdom. Joseph was bold enough to give an interpretation that could be proved right or wrong within three days. In only three days, everyone knew if Joseph had correctly interpreted the dream or not.

Remember me when it is well with you. Not unreasonably, Joseph requests that the cupbearer uses his influence to help Joseph once he is restored into Pharaoh's service, something he would initially forget to do. Refer to the comment made on v.23 for confirmation.

Abigail made a similar request when she served David and his men with supplies after her husband had refused to do so, an act that would have led to fighting: <<When the LORD has done to my lord according to all the good that he has spoken concerning you, and has appointed you prince over Israel, my lord shall have no cause of grief, or pangs of conscience, for having shed blood without cause or for having saved himself. And when the LORD has dealt well with my lord, then remember your servant>> (1 Samuel 25:30-31). David did indeed remember her, for he married her following the death of her husband. Jesus was asked to remember the thief who died beside him and he promised he would: <<Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' He replied, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise'>> (Luke 23:42-43).

That they should put me into the dungeon or pit. While Joseph's remark relates to Egypt, his mention of the dungeon, also translated as the pit, recalls for the reader what his brothers did to him in Canaan, as recorded in 37:20-29.

¹⁶ When the chief baker saw that the interpretation was favourable, he said to Joseph, 'I also had a dream: there were three cake baskets on my head, ¹⁷ 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.' ¹⁸ And Joseph answered, 'This is its interpretation: the three baskets are three days; ¹⁹ within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head – from you! – and hang you on a pole; and the birds will eat the flesh from you.'

Genesis 40:16-19

When the chief baker saw that the interpretation was favourable. The baker was encouraged that his companion had a good interpretation of his dream, and hoped for the same regarding his own dream, irrespective of any crime he may have committed.

Within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head – from you! Joseph's interpretation repeats the motif of lifting up someone's head (v.13). On this occasion, however, it has tragic consequences. Whether or not the idiom requires decapitation, the baker's corpse was to be hung on a pole or tree so that the birds could feast on it, reflecting the imagery of his dream. This portrayal would have been seen as a disgraceful way to die, but Joseph must have understood that the fate of the butler and the baker was each according to justice. Whatever crimes they were suspected of, the butler was innocent but the baker was guilty.

Displaying dead bodies on poles was a tradition that would continue: <<*When someone is convicted of a crime punishable by death and is executed, and you hang him on a tree, his corpse must not remain all night upon the tree; you shall bury him that same day, for anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse. You must not defile the land that the LORD your God is giving you for possession*>> (Deuteronomy 21:22-23), and: <<*So they impaled Haman on the pole he had set up for Mordecai. Then the king's fury subsided*>> (Esther 7:10 NIV). **The Romans went further when they introduced crucifixion.**

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. ²¹ He restored the chief cupbearer to his cupbearing, and he placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand;

²² but the chief baker he hanged, just as Joseph had interpreted to them.

Genesis 40:20-22

On the third day. The three days until Joseph was proved right must have been agonising for the butler and the baker, although more so for the baker, yet Joseph was found to be a true messenger of God.

The third day would become symbolic following the death of Christ: <<Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again>> (Luke 24:6-7).

Pharaoh's birthday may refer to his actual birthday or to the anniversary of his accession, when amnesties were more often granted. As Joseph revealed, the heads of both men are lifted up but with dramatically differing results.

Such birthday celebrations are a reminder of the fate of John the Baptist, although he would die for his integrity, and not for any crime: <<But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company, and she pleased Herod so much that he promised on oath to grant her whatever she might ask. Prompted by her mother, she said, 'Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter.' The king was grieved, yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he commanded it to be given; he sent and had John beheaded in the prison>> (Matthew 14:6-10).

²³ Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him.

Genesis 40:23

In spite of Joseph's specific request in v.14, the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him. The reader knows that God will remember Joseph, as he does other figures in Genesis 8:1, 19:29 and 30:22. The situation is reminiscent of words that would be written by King Solomon: <<Now there was found in it a poor, wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city. Yet no one remembered that poor man>> (Ecclesiastes 9:15).