

# PRISON PROPHECIES

## **GENESIS 40**

I hate detours. You know what they are. You are out for a drive and you have to get from point “A” to point “B” and you come across a sign that tells you that you cannot take the route you had planned. Instead, you have to take an alternate route that takes you out of your way.

Detours are not pleasant, but they are often necessary. When a driver takes a detour, he often discovers that, by doing so, he has bypassed a very treacherous and impossible situation. If he follows the detour patiently, he eventually comes back out onto the main road and finds that he has advanced in the direction of his final destination.

Detours are inevitable in the Christian life. They are often a part of the growth of our Christian character.

We have been following the career of Joseph. It has been a career with its share of detours. He began as the favorite son of his father, a fact not unnoticed by his jealous half-brothers. To make matters worse, he was given several dreams from the Lord that indicated he would one day rule over the entire clan.

In a single day, he went from beloved son to bondslave. His ruler’s robe was traded for the chains of servitude. He was transported like a cow or a sheep to a foreign land and sold to the highest bidder.

Then if things were not already bad enough, he was falsely accused by his master’s wife of attempted rape. His side of the story was not heard. There was no trial; he was simply cast into the prison.

What was happening? From a human perspective, Joseph’s life seems completely off track from the original vision given by God. Things had gone from bad to worse to the most extreme futility. But from God’s perspective, this was a part of a grand design. What looks like a detour is really the master plan.

While the Bible does not specifically state this to be the case, I believe that this prison detour in the life of Joseph was instrumental in building his character. There are some things Joseph needed to learn in prison.

- He needed to learn to trust the Lord in the midst of a hopeless situation. This is a lesson in patient persistence.

- Joseph learned humility in prison. Before the chapter is over, we shall see that Joseph is assigned to serve as a slave to certain prisoners. Just when it appears he could descend no lower in the social caste system, a new level of low is achieved.
- Joseph continued to learn faithfulness. He continues to prove his faithfulness in little things so that ultimately he will be faithful in large things.

## TWO NEW PRISONERS

*1 Then it came about after these things the cupbearer and the baker for the king of Egypt offended their lord, the king of Egypt. 2 And Pharaoh was furious with his two officials, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker. 3 So he put them in confinement in the house of the captain of the bodyguard, in the jail, the same place where Joseph was imprisoned. 4 And the captain of the bodyguard put Joseph in charge of them, and he took care of them; and they were in confinement for some time. (Genesis 40:1-4).*

We are not told how long Joseph was in prison before he was joined by two new prisoners. They were officials (סְרִיט) from the court of Pharaoh. We have already noted that this term is sometimes used to refer to one who is a eunuch. That was likely the case here. These two were the cupbearer and the baker of the king. This was a land where assassination through poisoning was popular. The position these two men held could come under no cloud of suspicion.

Verse 1 says that they had *offended their lord* -- the Hebrew uses the basic word חָטָא to say that they had *sinned*. We are not told what these two men had done to arouse the wrath of the king. Something had taken place to bring them to this point of disfavor.

They were placed *in confinement in the house of the captain of the bodyguard (40:3)*. Who was the captain of the bodyguard? It was Potiphar (Genesis 39:1). Here we learn something about Joseph's imprisonment that was not mentioned in the previous chapter. When Joseph was thrown into prison, it was the prison over which Potiphar had oversight. He was more than merely a warden, but the warden of the prison was under his command.

Now these two court officials were placed into the keeping of the prison. Their ultimate fate was as yet undetermined. They might eventually be restored to their positions of honor and power or they might continue in disfavor. In any case, it would do well to treat them with care, so Joseph was charged with their care. He was, in effect, to be a slave to these two prisoners and to see to their needs.

## TWO DREAMS IN THE NIGHT

*5 Then the cupbearer and the baker for the king of Egypt, who were confined in jail, both had a dream the same night, each man with his own dream and each dream with its own interpretation.*

*6 When Joseph came to them in the morning and observed them, behold, they were dejected. 7 And he asked Pharaoh's officials who were with him in confinement in his master's house, "Why are your faces so sad today?" 8 Then they said to him, "We have had a dream and there is no one to interpret it." Then Joseph said to them, "Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell it to me, please." (Genesis 40:5-8).*

There are only two Hebrews in the Old Testament who are recorded as being able to interpret these sort of puzzling dreams. The first is Joseph. The second is Daniel.

- Each was forcefully taken from the land of his birth while still a youth.
- Each served a pagan monarch.
- Each was in a civilization that held the interpretation of dreams in high regard.
- In each case, the interpreter was careful to disclaim any innate ability, attributing all such interpretations to God.

As we read this account, we are pressed to ask the question, "Does God still speak through dreams today?" Of course, we could merely answer that God is ABLE to speak through dreams if He so desires. God is God and He is able to do whatsoever He desires. But IS He generally speaking through dreams today? On the one hand, the Old Testament warns against those who listen to dreams and thereby falsely prophesy in the name of the Lord (Jeremiah 29:8-9). On the other hand, Peter quotes the Old Testament prophecy of the coming of the Spirit and how *your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams* (Acts 2:18).

And yet, I believe the answer is to say that the Lord does not normally give special revelation through dreams. Why do I say such a thing? Because dreams have been replaced and superseded by a more sure word from the Lord. Today we have the completed Scriptures to tell us what is God's word for us.

The problem with the modern interpretation of dreams is that you can never be certain whether the dream is from God or whether it is a deceptive dream as described by Jeremiah 29:8-9 or whether it is merely the result of indigestion and an over-active imagination. It will be of much greater profit for us to hold instead to the sure word of

God as found in the Scriptures.

Having said that, let me go on to admit that there have been many times when people have been moved to do the right thing through dreams. There is nothing necessarily wrong with this as long as such actions are in accord with Scripture. I know of people who dreamed of going to hell and who were then moved to repent and to believe the gospel. While I may have no basis to discern the value of the dream, I can at least affirm the correct action that resulted.

In Joseph's case, it is interesting that he even shows interest in hearing the dreams of these two men. After all, his dreams had only gotten him into trouble in the past.

- Joseph shows no bitterness of the past.
- Joseph shows no pride in his present ability.

Instead he continues to give the glory to God for any interpretation that might be forthcoming.

## THE DREAM OF THE CUP BEARER

*<sup>9</sup> So the chief cupbearer told his dream to Joseph, and said to him, "In my dream, behold, there was a vine in front of me; <sup>10</sup> and on the vine were three branches. And as it was budding, its blossoms came out, and its clusters produced ripe grapes. <sup>11</sup> Now Pharaoh's cup was in my hand; so I took the grapes and squeezed them into Pharaoh's cup, and I put the cup into Pharaoh's hand."*

*<sup>12</sup> Then Joseph said to him, "This is the interpretation of it: the three branches are three days; <sup>13</sup> within three more days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your office; and you will put Pharaoh's cup into his hand according to your former custom when you were his cupbearer."  
(Genesis 40:9-12).*

The meaning of this dream seems to have been fairly straightforward. The Chief Cupbearer might have been puzzled over the aspect of the three branches, but the rest of his dream pictured him doing the very service his position demanded.

Accordingly, Joseph interprets the dream by showing that the cupbearer shall be returned to his former position.

## JOSEPH'S REQUEST

*“Only keep me in mind when it goes well with you, and please do me a kindness by mentioning me to Pharaoh, and get me out of this house. <sup>15</sup> For I was in fact kidnapped from the land of the Hebrews, and even here I have done nothing that they should have put me into the dungeon.”*  
(Genesis 40:14-15).

Joseph asks a favor from the Chief Cupbearer. It is that he keep Joseph in mind and that he speak a kind word in Joseph’s behalf in the hearing of the Pharaoh.

There are some who point out that Joseph’s request is wrong because he is placing his faith in the ability and in the memory of the chief cupbearer rather than in the Lord. I do not believe this is the case. I don’t believe there was anything wrong in asking for this favor. The Lord had brought the situation about and it was not wrong to make this request.

On the other hand, we see that Joseph’s request would go two full years without an answer. How much different was the request that was made of Jesus as He was upon the cross: *“Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!”* <sup>43</sup> *And He said to him, “Truly I say to you, **today** you shall be with Me in Paradise.”* (Luke 23:42-43).

Joseph made a request of this chief cupbearer and the request was forgotten for two years. I don’t know what news filtered back down to the prison, but Joseph must have felt a bit abandoned. It is bad enough to be abandoned in any case, but to be abandoned by one you once helped seems all the worse.

We worship the One who suffered the greatest possible abandonment -- the One who cried out from the cross, “My God, My God, why have you abandoned Me?” He was abandoned for us so that we would never again be either abandoned or forgotten. And then He calls us to His table for a feast of remembrance.

## **THE DREAM OF THE BAKER**

*<sup>16</sup> When the chief baker saw that he had interpreted favorably, he said to Joseph, “I also saw in my dream, and behold, there were three baskets of white bread on my head; <sup>17</sup> and in the top basket there were some of all sorts of baked food for Pharaoh, and the birds were eating them out of the basket on my head.”*

*<sup>18</sup> Then Joseph answered and said, “This is its interpretation: the three baskets are three days; <sup>19</sup> within three more days Pharaoh will lift up your head from you and will hang you on a tree; and the birds will eat your flesh off you.”* (Genesis 40:16-19).

The dream of the baker would not have been quite so easily interpreted. He asks Joseph about the meaning of his dream only after hearing the favorable interpretation of the chief cupbearer's dream. Perhaps he thought that Joseph was on a favorable roll and that such a tendency would bring him luck.

The message Joseph gives to the chief baker is anything but pleasant. But Joseph does not water it down or refuse to share it. He feels the word from the Lord must be shared at any cost.

- The chief cupbearer would have his head lifted up (40:13).
- The chief baker would have his head lifted off (40:19).

Christianity does not ignore the bad news. It does not view the world through rose-colored glasses or pretend that bad things do not happen.

We have some good news to proclaim. We call it the gospel and the very word means "good news." But there are also times when it is our duty to proclaim bad news. It is bad news to anyone who continues to reject the free gift of Christ. God has promised to judge sins and He shall do it either in the person of the sinner or else He shall have done it in the person of the Savior.

## THE DREAMS FULFILLED

*20 Thus it came about on the third day, which was Pharaoh's birthday, that he made a feast for all his servants; and he lifted up the head of the chief cupbearer and the head of the chief baker among his servants.*

*21 And he restored the chief cupbearer to his office, and he put the cup into Pharaoh's hand; 22 but he hanged the chief baker, just as Joseph had interpreted to them. 23 Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him. (Genesis 40:20-23).*

The fulfillment to both of these dreams took place on the third day. We are not told that one of these officials was found to be innocent while the other was judged guilty by any testimony or evidence. Rather, the occasion for these actions was the Pharaoh's birthday. In all of his sovereign majesty as the "lord of the two lands," he could execute or he could free at a single command. Yet he was ultimately acting in accordance to that which had been foretold by the Lord.

*The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the LORD;  
He turns it wherever He wishes. (Proverbs 21:1).*

In spite of the success of this fulfillment, this chapter closes upon the note of seeming defeat. Instead of proclaiming the victory of the God of Joseph, *the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him* (40:23). It must have felt as though release had come so close, only to fail due to flagrant forgetfulness. As we ponder this seeming defeat, we ought to remember that the Lord delights in bringing His success on the heels of such a defeat.

<b>The Promise</b>	<b>Apparent Defeat</b>	<b>Supernatural Fulfillment</b>
<b>Abraham:</b> Your descendants will be a great multitude	He and Sarah are both barren and old	A son is born in their old age
<b>Jacob:</b> You will be given rulership over the land	He becomes a fugitive in Haran	He returns with great wealth
<b>Joseph:</b> Your family will bow down to you	A slave in the prison of a foreign superpower	He is raised up to become the second in all of Egypt
<b>Moses:</b> You will lead your country out of bondage	Rejected by Israelites and becomes a fugitive in Midian	Leads Israel out of Egypt and through the Red Sea
<b>Jesus:</b> The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand	Crucified, dead and buried; His disciples scattered	Resurrection; Ascension; the giving of the Holy Spirit to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth

This is not just their story. It is our story, too. We have a promise of our future heavenly inheritance. It is the summation of all that we have in Christ. But in the meantime, we struggle with our frailties and with abiding sin and with our weaknesses. Our ultimate fulfillment shall only take place at when we see Jesus -- *when Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory* (Colossians 3:4).

In each of the above examples, Satan offers a temptation; an alternate means of accomplishing the same goal. In each case, he offers what appears to be a potential shortcut.

- Abraham: Take Hagar and have a son by her.
- Jacob: Bargain for the birthright and steal the family blessing.
- Joseph: Sleep with Potiphar's wife and use the situation to gain some leverage.

- Moses: Murder the Egyptian Taskmaster and deliver the people of Israel through force of arms.
- Jesus: “Bow down before me and I will give you all of the kingdoms of the earth” (Matthew 4:9).

In each case, Satan says, “Don’t take the long way. Don’t take what looks to be God’s long detour. Take my way instead. I’ll give you instant gratification. Instant success.” Satan offers what appears to be the easy way, but it is in reality an easy road to destruction.

*Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide, and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and many are those who enter by it. <sup>14</sup> For the gate is small, and the way is narrow that leads to life, and few are those who find it. (Matthew 7:13-14).*