

## Prayer

Praise You, Lord Jesus Christ, for You have come to live among us in this world, to share our thoughts and feelings, our joys and struggles. Thank You for showing us the way of love that is always true, and unyielding to evil. Pour out Your Holy Spirit on us so that we may live as You did; not in small measure, but in ever greater abundance until our lives are transformed! Praise You Lord Jesus Christ, for all eternity; AMEN!

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: Music

*Pray for any musicians you know, and the orchestras, bands and soloists with whom and with which you are familiar. Pray that they may be used for the uplifting of souls and the glory of God*

### On-going prayers

- *Pray for those affected by typhoons and earthquakes in the far East*
- *Give thanks for humour, and everything that makes people laugh*
- *Pray for those who are still suffering the effects of world recession*

## Meditation

Open our eyes to something of You, Lord. Today, not tomorrow:  
We cannot be sure when it may be, so set our souls on readiness;  
Keep us looking for that moment, that look, that glimpse  
By which we know that Your heart has opened up to us.

Where will we find this revelation? We will not know till it is found  
And then the Spirit will flow and mingle with our needy souls,  
Our eyes will see, our feelings leap with praise and wonder;  
Disclosure all divine will lift our hearts to heights of heaven.

Today, O Lord, expose Your will to us today; not just any day ...  
We cannot live without the driving, zealous, passionate force  
Which stirs within our yearning breasts to find its truth in You  
And rest in all Your Word; Your blessed salvation won on Calvary.

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## Bible Study - Genesis 40:16-23

<sup>16</sup> When the chief baker saw that Joseph's interpretation was sympathetic, he said to him, 'I also had a dream in which I had three bread baskets on my head, <sup>17</sup> and in the top basket there were all kinds of baked food products for Pharaoh, but birds were pecking at the food in the basket on my head.' <sup>18</sup> Joseph replied, 'This is what it means; the three baskets are three days, <sup>19</sup> and within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head; he will chop it off and hang you on a tree, where the birds will peck away your flesh!'

<sup>20</sup> On the third day, it was Pharaoh's birthday, and he gave a feast for all his servants. He lifted up the heads of the chief cupbearer and the chief baker in front of everyone: <sup>21</sup> he restored the chief cupbearer to his position, so that he placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand, <sup>22</sup> but he had the chief baker killed, just as Joseph said in his interpretation. <sup>23</sup> But the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph; he forgot him.

## Review

Now this passage of Scripture is the place where the story of Joseph becomes interesting, and the theme of the interpretation of dreams begins to take centre stage. At first, we may think that this is simply the second half of the story of the cup-bearer and the baker, which illustrates Joseph's ability to interpret dreams. However, in God's providence, nothing is random or mentioned merely for the sake of storytelling. Today, we find out more about how God used Joseph, and there is a heightened sense of danger for all those in prison, who faced life or death at the behest of their autocratic leader and god, Pharaoh. Doubtless Joseph

realised his life depended upon the one true God of his forefathers, but as the story unfolds, we seem to be getting closer and closer to the enigmatic character of Pharaoh himself. By the end of today's passage, we sense that he will have an important role to play in this story of God's plans for His people.

In yesterday's passage (40:1-15), the chief cup-bearer had received a favourable report about his dream from Joseph, who predicted that he would soon be restored to his former job and be reinstated to his senior position in court. In the Egyptian belief systems of the day, the chief baker would have expected that his own dream, though obviously very different from that of his friend, would have reflected the same working of the gods. He therefore felt confident to ask Joseph for the interpretation of his own dream. However, as we can clearly see, the dream was radically different, and Joseph quickly told the baker what seems obvious to us without any special gift of interpretation, which is that he would not receive Pharaoh's favour. However, Joseph's ability went beyond stating the obvious, and he was able to perceive something in the dream that lay beyond the obvious, and perhaps he saw this in the sign of the birds. His interpretation of this was that the baker would be summarily executed by Pharaoh!

The story unfolds to reveal what happened to prove Joseph's abilities as an interpreter of dreams (40:20f.) It was usual for Pharaoh to offer pardons on his birthday; it was an ancient rite in many cultures. He appears to have made some kind of public example of the two men (40:20), setting free the cup-bearer and executing the baker, exactly as predicted. It is likely that this example of summary retribution was designed to keep people in fear of Pharaoh as a God and demonstrate to the people that Pharaoh had the power over life and death. The irony of the story lies in the fact that through God, Joseph showed that he could know even the mind of Pharaoh!

But there even more to this story! Stop for a moment and think about what we have just read. We have already noticed that this, the last story in Genesis, is about God's salvation of His people, and there are a significant number of things in the story which remind us of God's saving work through Jesus in the New Testament. The death of the victim in this story is 'after three days' and 'on a tree' (40:19); the authorities release a favoured prisoner a special day, with the other being killed (40:21); and bread and wine are represented by the cup-bearer and the baker. These and other story elements remind us of Christ, and of His own death for our salvation!

It would be unwise to say that these parts of the story point directly to the saving work of Jesus on the Cross. However, the Old Testament constantly describes various elements of God's saving activity, which is eventually focussed in the life and death of Jesus in the New Testament. It is not surprising that some features of God's saving work turn up in unexpected places within scripture! At the very least, we can say that whatever the ancient people of Joseph's day made of what happened, the way it is described here in Genesis is designed to tell us that God is active in salvation. This is, after all, the theme of the whole of Scripture!

### ***Going Deeper***

The Bible study continues with further information about the following subjects:

- The baker, the baskets and the bread
- Pharaoh's birthday party
- Some further points about the story of Joseph

### **Going Deeper**

The story of the baker's dream and its interpretation seems relatively straightforward, but there are some unexpected parts of it which need our attention. Behind it all, God was working his own purposes, which were to bring about the restoration and reconciliation of His people. The growth and maturity of Joseph in the different circumstances of life in which he found himself were important for the future of God's saving work.

#### ***The baker, the baskets and the bread.***

The baker was clearly optimistic. The young servant who had been assigned to see to the needs of the two court officials in prison had perhaps said what his friend the cup-bearer wanted to hear, which was 'good news'! There is no doubt that the Egyptians took their dreams very seriously, for outside of prison, priests, magicians and soothsayers abounded who would explain a dream; that is, for a price! How fortunate to have a foreign slave who claimed to have these abilities, and who was respected within the prison.

Initially, the baker's dream was delightful and full of potential. Those who have researched the art of bakery in ancient Egypt tell us that 38 cake varieties and 57 bread varieties were expected of a bread and pastry 'chef' capable of serving Pharaoh, and a three tiered wicker basket carried on the head was a traditional way for fresh food to be presented from the oven to Pharaoh. Up to this point, the dream appeared to indicate that the baker was able to return to his job; an interpretation clearly expected by the baker who had just

heard similar for his friend (though whether they believed what was told them by Joseph at this point is by no means clear). The trouble was that the dream contained birds, both 'clean' and 'unclean' (indicated by the Hebrew, but not easily translatable) who 'pecked' at the bread, obviously making it less than perfect and therefore unacceptable to Pharaoh.

Joseph's reply was swift. He saw in the dream what the baker did not, which was the potential for disaster. In Hebrew, as we saw yesterday, the expression 'to lift up someone's head' meant to honour them. However, Joseph played on the literal meaning of this term, and predicted that Pharaoh would lift up the baker's head from his body literally, and have him killed, his body being hung on a tree (literally, impaled) where the birds would eat his flesh (40:19)!

### ***Pharaoh's birthday party***

Read the description of Pharaoh's birthday party, and you will find that a certain amount of deception took place. It was a general ancient tradition noted in many different ancient civilisations, for a leader to show magnanimous intent towards prisoners on such an occasion. Such events are certainly recorded in Egyptian hieroglyphics from early times. On this date, the two court officials were released, the chief cup-bearer and the baker (40:20) both being 'lifted up' before the entire court, and for half a moment, we think that the baker might have escaped his judgement. However, soon after the public release from prison, Pharaoh had the baker summarily executed 'just as Joseph said in his interpretation' (40:22).

Such a fate was, for an Egyptian, 'worse than death'. Most analyses of ancient Egypt show that court officials as well as Pharaohs were mummified, so that they were considered worthy of passing into the afterlife. To be impaled upon a tree was an indignity feared by Egyptians, for whom such a fate meant that they were destroyed and had no 'body' to sustain them after death.

The relief of the cup-bearer however, was palpable; he had been asked by Joseph to remember him to Pharaoh and attempt to obtain Joseph's release from prison, but he was so pleased with his freedom he forgot (40:23). It was not to be, and we are drawn towards looking at the wider story of what was happening in the providence of God. Joseph may have made a mistake in appealing for human help to get out of prison, for despite the clear evidence that God was 'with him' (39:3,23 etc.), he still felt the need to ask the cup-bearer to appeal to Pharaoh on his behalf (40:15). The fact that this was not forthcoming threw Joseph back on depending upon God for his future; not on human help, and certainly not from Pharaoh.

### ***Some further theological points about broader story of Joseph***

It is easy to forget whilst reading this story in chapter 40 that it is part of a longer narrative of the work of God in bringing peace to Jacob's family, the infant 'people of God', and placing them in Egypt where they would grow to become a nation. If we look at the whole of chapter 40, we might think that the story is all about Joseph. From his point of view, Joseph was thrown into prison again, and prevented from rising in human society (as he tended to do). He nevertheless continued to do what was right and impress people by his godliness. Earlier on in his story, his own two dreams had shown the way forward, but projected so far ahead it was to a future for which he could only hope. Possibly, however, he had learned from his earlier experience, and the two dreams of the court officials served to show Joseph's prowess and potential, but he had to accept that the end result of them was that he has to wait even further. Joseph could not engineer his escape from prison by means of his good qualities and abilities. Only God could do that.

The real power behind the story is God. If we focus on God instead of Joseph, the dreams illustrate the fragile and superstitious nature of the Egyptian world to which Joseph had come. Yet Joseph, by means of God's presence with him, was able to rise above this pagan religion, offering his fellow-prisoners the benefit of his wisdom without entering in to their beliefs. He held on to his belief in God, and this was essential. God had to teach Joseph qualities of patience and utter dependence upon Him before He could begin the process of drawing Him back together with his family after everything that had happened. Each commentary I have read in preparation for this study emphasises that the length of time that Joseph remained in Egypt before he finally met his family again was considerable; maybe between twenty and thirty years. This was time enough for Joseph to forget God if he so wanted, and abandon the God of His Fathers because He had abandoned him. The story of chapter 40 suggests that from time to time, Joseph showed his faith by acting in God's name (40:8), and this faith was rewarded as Joseph's predictions came true.

Lastly, as we have already seen, there are plenty of clues in the story to God's ways of working salvation. Therefore, this story is an important part of the 'salvation history of God's people, and we should not forget that although Joseph did not know this, the future of God's people depended upon him. One day he would hold high office in order to comply with God's plans, and his preparation for that high office was yet more years of slavery service and being left in prison. When the time came for him to deal with others, hold them in prison and then release them (as would happen when he finally met his brothers), Joseph was sufficiently knowledgeable and in control, for God to use him to bring about an amazing reconciliation, without which the people of Israel simply would not exist to this day.

## Application

The main theme of this passage remains that of patience to endure through suffering, and we should take the opportunity to remind ourselves of the many other great men of God who have had to endure hardship and trial for years before being used by God. David fled from Saul for decades before the old king Saul died and David was able to build the Kingdom of Israel again (1 Sam 31f.). Job endured long suffering, inexplicable torment and unfathomable arguments from his friends before God (as in the book of Job) turned around his own life. All these and many more such stories are there in the Old Testament for our instruction and guidance. It is therefore sad that when life becomes difficult, people turn away from faith today so quickly. There is a great deal of help to be found within these stories if we are willing to read them and know them.

One thing is also obvious from this passage which is new. Joseph was a godly man who was dealing with people ever closer to the centre of power of the country in which he found himself. Towards the centres of power in most countries, the rules of relationships can become complex, and whether anyone is able to succeed in any matter is related to who is in favour with whom. It is well known that power corrupts, and this is true particularly for those who have no moral compass. Therefore, the closer Joseph came to the centre of power in Egypt, the more important it was that he drew closer to God. It is difficult to draw general rules from this, but it is very clear that people of faith who work close to the centre of power in any country are people who need our prayers and our support. The stability of nations depends upon their faithfulness to the God in whom they trust.

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## Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss whether there could be any other reasons for the survival of one and the death of the other official in this episode, or is it just an example of manic dictatorship?
2. Discuss the feelings of Joseph at this time in his life. What hope could he have for salvation?
3. How does chapter 40 contribute to our understanding of the whole Joseph story?

## Discipleship

### Personal comment:

*Many people in many parts of the world have had to be faithful to God in what appears to be hopeless situations. Some of the peoples of Africa who deserve better from their governments, for example, or past generations of Christians in Western countries who have endured centuries of persecution before general renewal came to their lands (consider Germany and England, for example). How long will we have to serve the Lord patiently before He can fulfil His desire to move in power through this world again? I have strong opinions about this myself, but one thing is certain. We cannot 'jump' God into doing today what He has planned for tomorrow.*

### Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *What are you impatient to see happen within this world? Relief from famine? World revival? Peace between the nations? Place these dreams and aspirations before the Lord and ask Him to help you pray for them appropriately and thus gain a godly perspective on them.*
- *Pray for the issue that concern you and ask the Lord to bring His Kingdom and peace to this world. Pray that God's people will be ready for Him to come again.*

## Final Prayer

Inspire us with Your love, Lord God, and give us grace to build our faith upon the truth of the One who saved us. May we not be pulled apart by the teaching we hear, but built up into Your people, upon the Rock who is our Saviour. May we read Your word, pray with clear purpose, and live as You would have us live; through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN