

## Genesis 39:20 to 40:23 The prisoners and their dreams

### Introduction

‘Alton Towers’, ‘Blackpool Pleasure Beach’ and similar entertainment venues –what image immediately comes to your mind when these names are mentioned? I suspect for many of us it is the roller-coasters. Once a simple contraption that went forwards or backwards at different speeds but now at the cutting edge theme parks higher intensity rides are on offer that in effect potentially require empty pockets, glasses and hats removed and in a few cases riders strapped in like the recipients of straightjackets to prevent possible injuries with medical support on standby. One of the latter rides at Carrowinds Theme Park at Charlotte, North Carolina, ‘Nighthawk’, that I opted to avoid on a visit in 2012 caused me to think a little about it as I sat for a short time on a bench near the ride exit, adjacent to the medical support team. Why would anyone want to put themselves through that kind of pressure? Not only that –why would they pay for such an experience? In this case personal preference is the answer! One person’s pleasure would be the exact opposite for others; however, real life can be like a rollercoaster ride. Moments of exhilaration can be followed very suddenly by challenges of gut-wrenching proportions. The life of Joseph is as good an example we can find in the Bible to illustrate life in its extremes. What is though so important and the key lesson in Joseph’s story is the fact that behind the apparently random human experiences through which he passed God had a purpose. It was He who made sense out of the combination of life experiences through which Joseph passed. As he later would look back the links would emerge. This does not mean for a moment that the evil things that happened were other than totally wrong. The good news of the Gospel is that redemption can come out of the most unpromising of circumstances. This is what gives us a hope for a future of God’s redemptive purposes for our own lives and that of other people around us.

### 1. The Circumstances of Joseph (Genesis 39:20-40:8)

(a) **Senseless injustice** (Genesis 39:20a) *Joseph’s master took him and put him in prison, the place where the king’s prisoners were confined.* It made no sense what happened. If Joseph was innocent he ought never to have been put in jail. If he was perceived to be guilty then as a slave a swift execution was an inevitable fate. Yet Joseph was in prison. In all of our lives there are unexpected happenings that do not conform to any expected pattern. If good things we quickly adjust and feel rather grateful for the blessing, but if bad or sad things have happened we can have a deep sense of injustice and have our ‘why’ questions to ask. Undoubtedly Joseph began in the latter category, but within a relatively short space of time the Lord arranged some blessings for Him.

(b) **A Surprising Opportunity** (Genesis 39:20b-23) *But while Joseph was there in the prison, <sup>21</sup>the Lord was with him; He showed him kindness and granted him favour in the eyes of the prison warder. <sup>22</sup>So the warder put Joseph in charge of all those held in the prison, and he was made responsible for all that was done there. <sup>23</sup>The warder paid no attention to anything under Joseph’s care, because the Lord was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did.* Management of Potiphar’s estate may have included some people management, but probably focussed more on the maintenance of his owner’s property and cultivation of his food crops. Here in the prison the management was of people, and people who were equally unhappy about their lot in life. What a C.V. God was arranging for Joseph! He could have been very bitter and disruptive and caused all kinds of upset in the prison, but the maturity level of his faith was such that he didn’t take that option. All of us can manage reasonably well when life is going sweetly but when the going gets tough we can learn all kinds of things about ourselves and

about other people. If anyone had a right to be angry and unco-operative it was Joseph; yet years worth of maturity lessons were learned by him in a decade of tough discipleship training. God honoured him because he did the right thing. He did the jobs asked of him in prison, possibly when others declined the options. He made himself available to assist the Warder and his officials which must have been a pleasant and unexpected bonus for them. The wonderful statement here in Genesis 39:23: *But while Joseph was there in the prison, the Lord was with him; He showed him kindness and granted him favour in the eyes of the prison warden* is a powerful reminder to us how to respond to other people when we feel we have been unfairly treated. Paul in Romans 12:17-21 gave a fuller New Testament statement on this important theme. *Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone.* <sup>18</sup> *If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.* <sup>19</sup> *Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord.* <sup>20</sup> *On the contrary: 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.'* <sup>21</sup> *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.* These are incredible words and a real challenge to practice them, but are the standard by which Christians can look to measure up to when we have relational difficulties in our family circles, our workplaces and even within our church families. The damage that has been done when Christians hold grievances for up to decades against one another and the impact it has on the work of many local congregations is truly alarming. Although inside Joseph still felt deep pain at what had happened to him, his outward conduct was an amazing witness to the Lord. The grace of God he had experienced to some degree he wanted to pass that on to others in that most unpromising environment. No wonder some Bible commentators have described Joseph as a type of Jesus.

(c) **A Divine Appointment** (Genesis 40:1-8) *Some time later, the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt offended their master, the king of Egypt.* <sup>2</sup> *Pharaoh was angry with his two officials, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker,* <sup>3</sup> *and put them in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, in the same prison where Joseph was confined.* <sup>4</sup> *The captain of the guard assigned them to Joseph, and he attended them. After they had been in custody for some time,* <sup>5</sup> *each of the two men – the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt, who were being held in prison – had a dream the same night, and each dream had a meaning of its own.* <sup>6</sup> *When Joseph came to them the next morning, he saw that they were dejected.* <sup>7</sup> *So he asked Pharaoh's officials who were in custody with him in his master's house, 'Why do you look so sad today?'* <sup>8</sup> *'We both had dreams,' they answered, 'but there is no one to interpret them.'* Then Joseph said to them, *'Do not interpret them to belong to God? Tell me your dreams.'* As a slave the chance of meeting a prominent civic official and having a meaningful conversation were zero. It was a total impossibility in such a segregated society. It was not luck or chance that these two royal officials were not only put in the same prison as Joseph, but in the same wing. To be in the same prison was not a surprise as its premises were in the vicinity of the seat of government and the place where significant prisoners were kept. What is unusual is that this slave was assigned to take care of them. I think it highly likely that Joseph was treated less than well by them. After all, they probably were deeply frustrated at losing their privileged offices in the Royal Palace. No-one would care if they spoke roughly or required Joseph to carry out menial tasks for them. Genesis 40:4b records: *After they had been in custody for some time . . .*; here maybe for a few months, but possibly for even longer, for a few years, God intervened again by sending these vivid, unforgettable dreams. Once more Joseph displayed grace to these men possibly praying for them; certainly fulfilling every reasonable duty of care to them. The words of the apostle Paul from I Corinthians 15:58 fit here so well: *Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.* This is a promise from the Lord that we can be assured by as well. Paul told Timothy: *Join with me in suffering, like a good soldier of Christ Jesus.* <sup>4</sup> *No one*

serving as a soldier gets entangled in civilian affairs, but rather tries to please his commanding officer (II Timothy 2:3-4). Another passage we know so well, again from Paul's writings reinforces this truth to our minds and hearts: **And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him**, who have been called according to His purpose. <sup>29</sup>For those God foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. <sup>30</sup>And those He predestined, He also called; those He called, He also justified; those He justified, He also glorified (Romans 8:28-30). The question I have to ask myself as I ask each one of us is this? Do we know it or simply hope this is the case? Anyone can say I believe God is in control when everything is rosy and the sun is shining. It is a different picture all together when storm-clouds are overhead and the future is less than clear. We sing - 'In heavenly love abiding no change my heart shall fear; and safe is such confiding, for nothing changes here. The storm may roar without me, my heart may low be laid, but God is round about me, and can I be dismayed?' (C.M.P.331) There are times when God allows us opportunities in life to experience such truths.

## 2. **The Condemnation of the Baker** (Genesis 40:16-19)

<sup>16</sup> When the chief baker saw that Joseph had given a favourable interpretation, he said to Joseph, 'I too had a dream: on my head were three baskets of bread. <sup>17</sup> In the top basket were all kinds of baked goods for Pharaoh, but the birds were eating them out of the basket on my head.' <sup>18</sup> 'This is what it means,' Joseph said. 'The three baskets are three days. <sup>19</sup> Within three days Pharaoh will lift off your head and impale your body on a pole. And the birds will eat away your flesh.' Although in context this was the second dream Joseph interpreted, it was the answer that took the most courage to utter. Joseph as a slave could have been forgiven for wanting to remain in everyone's good books, but faithfulness to God required him to be honest with this man. He could probably have got away with some vague words, but he had to do what God wanted him to do and that was calmly to indicate that he had bad news to share. I am sure he uttered the words sympathetically but nevertheless the meaning was crystal clear. The man or woman in whom God delights is willing to speak the truth even when it is hard to receive. In I Samuel 3:10-18 there is the extraordinary story of the boy Samuel whom God used to speak to the prophet Eli. It states: *The Lord came and stood there, calling as at the other times, 'Samuel! Samuel!'* Then Samuel said, 'Speak, for your servant is listening.' <sup>11</sup> And the Lord said to Samuel: 'See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make the ears of everyone who hears about it tingle. <sup>12</sup> At that time I will carry out against Eli everything I spoke against his family – from beginning to end. <sup>13</sup> For I told him that I would judge his family for ever because of the sin he knew about; his sons uttered blasphemies against God, and he failed to restrain them. <sup>14</sup> Therefore I swore to the house of Eli, "The guilt of Eli's house will never be atoned for by sacrifice or offering." <sup>15</sup> Samuel lay down until morning and then opened the doors of the house of the Lord. He was afraid to tell Eli the vision, <sup>16</sup> but Eli called him and said, 'Samuel, my son.' Samuel answered, 'Here I am.' <sup>17</sup> 'What was it he said to you?' Eli asked. 'Do not hide it from me. May God deal with you, be it ever so severely, if you hide from me anything he told you.' <sup>18</sup> **So Samuel told him everything, hiding nothing from him.** Then Eli said, 'He is the Lord; let him do what is good in his eyes.' Some years ago in one of America's biggest corporate business failures, Enron Energy Group, there was a public outcry at the extent of the financial fiddles that went on. A reputable firm Arthur Anderson handled their books, but no-one that we know of spoke a word. If only a significant figure in the company had spoken up – maybe it would have made no difference. They might have lost their career and the malpractice continued as before. In every workplace up and down the land; in our Parliaments and Council Chambers; in boardrooms and trade union offices –if only there were men and women to stand for what is right; Joseph did in his day; at this time in a wing of a prison. One day he would have the ear of the nation, but that only came about because

God could trust him to be a man of integrity in a prison. In each of our lives may we be women and men on whom God can rely as people of personal integrity.

### 3. The Celebration of the Butler (Genesis 40:9-15)

*So the chief cupbearer told Joseph his dream. He said to him, 'In my dream I saw a vine in front of me,<sup>10</sup> and on the vine were three branches. As soon as it budded, it blossomed, and its clusters ripened into grapes.<sup>11</sup> Pharaoh's cup was in my hand, and I took the grapes, squeezed them into Pharaoh's cup and put the cup in his hand.'<sup>12</sup> 'This is what it means,' Joseph said to him. 'The three branches are three days.<sup>13</sup> Within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your position, and you will put Pharaoh's cup in his hand, just as you used to do when you were his cupbearer.<sup>14</sup> But when all goes well with you, remember me and show me kindness; mention me to Pharaoh and get me out of this prison.<sup>15</sup> I was forcibly carried off from the land of the Hebrews, and even here I have done nothing to deserve being put in a dungeon.'* (a) **God's Word through Joseph** (Genesis 40:9-13) This dream like the other one was clear and decisive in its meaning. Joseph's message was precise and dated and would either be 100% right or 100% wrong. He told the butler: *'This is what it means,' Joseph said to him. 'The three branches are three days.<sup>13</sup> Within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your position, and you will put Pharaoh's cup in his hand, just as you used to do when you were his cupbearer* (Genesis 40:12-13). This by definition was a prophetic word, unlike many who claim such a gift today; it was not holy guesswork, but the utterance of God's message to this man. This man could never totally forget what was said to him that day. He would for a time do so, but it could not go on for ever. The seed of God's message had been planted in his life. In this encounter God's message had done what he could, the rest had to be left with God. In our words of witness our calling is to be faithful in passing on God's Word to people who don't know Jesus. Only God can convert people. All kinds of pressures and priorities will attempt to squeeze out the primacy of mission in the lives of individual Christians and in the work of a Christian Church. We dare not water down the Gospel message because we are accountable to God. We must not deny people opportunities to hear it as far as we can, because we are accountable as God's people if we fail to be His witnesses. In Ezekiel 33:6-9, in a passage in which God's messengers were pictured as the watchmen on a city's gates, God had this to say to the Jewish people of Ezekiel's day and the followers of Jesus in this day: *<sup>6</sup>But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet to warn the people and the sword comes and takes someone's life, that person's life will be taken because of their sin, but I will hold the watchman accountable for their blood.'*<sup>7</sup> *'Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the people of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from Me.<sup>8</sup> When I say to the wicked, "You wicked person, you will surely die," and you do not speak out to dissuade them from their ways, that wicked person will die for their sin, and I will hold you accountable for their blood.<sup>9</sup> But if you do warn the wicked person to turn from their ways and they do not do so, they will die for their sin, though you yourself will be saved.* A church that claims to be Evangelical but merely opens the church doors on a Sunday and thinks that is acceptable to God as the sum total of their evangelism has lost the right to that title. Our calling is non-negotiable. Paul in I Corinthians 9:16, 19-23 explained it this way: *For when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, since I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!... Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.<sup>20</sup> To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law.<sup>21</sup> To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law.<sup>22</sup> To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.<sup>23</sup> I do all this for the sake of the gospel that I may share in its blessings.* When God provides opportunities to engage in evangelism we

need to have good reasons not to share our faith rather than assume the alternative is the default position. (b) **The heartache of Joseph** (Genesis 40:14-15) <sup>14</sup> *But when all goes well with you, remember me and show me kindness; mention me to Pharaoh and get me out of this prison.* <sup>15</sup> *I was forcibly carried off from the land of the Hebrews, and even here I have done nothing to deserve being put in a dungeon.* It would take a very hard-hearted person not to feel the pain in Joseph's heart in every word of this utterance. Don't ever think for a moment that the great men and women of the faith down the centuries felt less deeply than you or I their human weakness in the face of adversity. There would have been nights in his cell when the tears flowed at the injustice he had suffered. If you and I are faithful to God we too will weep over injustice; we too will cry out to God at the unfairness of life in so many situations. It is deeply painful to be falsely accused of things we haven't done. The stress that inevitably has an effect as time passes on before justice is done. For Joseph two long lonely years would drag out the injustice he had endured. The matter should not have taken so long at one level, but had Joseph simply been released from prison after a pardon from Pharaoh on the recommendation of his Chief Butler then the future course of history would have been very different. God would bring good out of this sad situation. He too can have a redemptive purpose in the circumstances we face individually, and as a church family. In Psalm 37, in a Psalm David wrote concerning how the righteous feel when injustice has been done, we read these words: **Commit your way to the Lord; trust in Him and He will do this: <sup>6</sup>He will make your righteous reward shine like the dawn, your vindication like the noonday sun. <sup>7</sup>Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for Him; do not fret when people succeed in their ways, when they carry out their wicked schemes. <sup>8</sup>Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret – it leads only to evil. <sup>9</sup>For those who are evil will be destroyed, but those who hope in the Lord will inherit the land.** (Psalm 37:5-9). These are wonderful words of assurance from the Lord that He will honour us as we honour Him.

#### 4. **The Circumstances of Joseph** (Genesis 40:20-23)

<sup>20</sup> *Now the third day was Pharaoh's birthday, and he gave a feast for all his officials. He lifted up the heads of the chief cupbearer and the chief baker in the presence of his officials: <sup>21</sup>he restored the chief cupbearer to his position, so that he once again put the cup into Pharaoh's hand – <sup>22</sup>but he impaled the chief baker, just as Joseph had said to them in his interpretation. <sup>23</sup>**The chief cupbearer, however, did not remember Joseph; he forgot him.*** These verses at the end of Genesis 40 are a sting in the tail. Expectations are high that resolution will come for Joseph and his nightmare will be over. **The chief cupbearer, however, did not remember Joseph; he forgot him** (Genesis 40:23). This man had the ability to bring the people together and resolve Joseph's plight, but he abdicated his position. He was free to speak to Pharaoh and Potiphar, not at any time but there must have been some opportunities during the two long years it would take. Instead he chose to keep his head down and not get involved. How many people are like that today in our society? They may see a crime being committed, but so many pretend they didn't see it and wouldn't call the police or offer to be a witness. Human beings too often, sometimes even other professing Christians, let us down or behave in inexplicable ways. Isaiah 2:22 (NLV) states: *Don't put your trust in mere humans. They are as frail as breath. What good are they?* Proverbs 19:21 reminds us: *Many are the plans in a person's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails.* This is a most important verse. When we put the Lord first He will vindicate us eventually and false charges will eventually be shown for what they are. Yet it is in adversity that godly character can be cultivated. May God help us personally and in our church family develop and display a Christ-like graciousness in the face of adversity, that He may be glorified in us and through us, for Jesus' sake, Amen.

