

Gen. 40: Joseph Interprets Dreams

Let us pray...

Our passage begins with Joseph wrongly imprisoned based upon a false accusation of rape made by the wife of Potiphar, an Egyptian official.

“Some time later, the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt offended their master, the king of Egypt. Pharaoh was angry with his two officials, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker, and put them in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, in the same prison where Joseph was confined. The captain of the guard assigned them to Joseph, and he attended them.

After they had been in custody for some time, 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.

When Joseph came to them the next morning, he saw that they were dejected. So he asked Pharaoh’s officials who were in custody with him in his master’s house, “Why are your faces so sad today?” “We both had dreams,” they answered, “but there is no one to interpret them.” Then Joseph said to them, “Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell me your dreams.”

So the chief cupbearer told Joseph his dream. He said to him, “In my dream I saw a vine in front of me, and on the vine were three branches. As soon as it budded, it blossomed, and its clusters ripened into grapes. 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.”

“This is what it means,” Joseph said to him. “The three branches are three days. 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. But when all goes well with you, remember me and show me kindness; mention me to Pharaoh and get me out of this prison. For 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.”

When the chief baker saw that Joseph had given a favorable interpretation, he said to Joseph, “I too had a dream: On my head were three baskets of bread. 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.”

“This is what it means,” Joseph said. “The three baskets are three days. ¹⁹ Within three days Pharaoh will lift off your head and hang you on a tree. And the birds will eat away your flesh.”

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: He restored the chief cupbearer to his position, so that he once again put the cup into Pharaoh’s hand, but he hanged the chief baker, just as Joseph had said to them in his interpretation. The chief cupbearer, however, did not remember Joseph; he forgot him.

This is the Word of the Lord.

One afternoon in 1865, President Lincoln's Cabinet entered a council room for a meeting. They found the President seated at the head of the table with his face buried in his hands. When he raised his head, his expression was grave and worn. "Gentlemen," he said, "before long you will have important news." Someone inquired, "Have you bad news, Mr. President? Is it something serious?"

"I have heard nothing; I've had no news," he replied. "But last night I had a dream. I dreamed I was in a boat, alone. I had no oars, no rudder. I was helpless in a boundless ocean." Then the President added, "I have had that dream many times during the war. And each time, some great battle came within a day or two. Yes, gentlemen, perhaps tomorrow, perhaps in just a few hours, you will have important news." Five hours later, Abraham Lincoln was assassinated.

Like Abraham Lincoln and like some of you, I have had dreams and clear premonitions about significant events that were soon to take place. In one dream when I was 13, angels surrounded my bed to tell me that one of my friends was dead. I told them over and over, “No, he’s not dead. He’s on vacation, and he’ll be back soon.” They insisted, and I woke up crying. That day, the New Hampshire state police called to say that they had found him. In both the Scriptures and our lives, the Lord can use dreams to prepare us for bad news, to guide our prayers, and sometimes to encourage us along paths He wants us to take.

Whatever your experience is with dreams, whatever your understanding of their meaning may be, I want you to try to set all of that aside for a few moments. This morning I'd like us to consider dreams as if we were Egyptians in the time of Joseph, around 1900 BC. This may be a challenge for us because we also have to imagine life apart from our knowledge of a loving, personal God who rules time and cares for us in every moment. To the ancient Egyptians, dreams were a crucial part of their religious practices and were used to try to discern how the gods were trying to communicate with them. As we'll see, Joseph has brought to Egypt a completely different view of dreams, because the one true God guides him and grants him discernment the Egyptians lacked.

In ancient Egypt there were schools called "houses of life" that were devoted to studying dreams. There were books comprised of dream descriptions and the various interpretations those dreams had been given by the experts. Those dream experts analyzed the symbolism dreams could have, hoping through them to predict the future. Since the highest Egyptian rulers were thought to be semi-divine, their dreams were presumed to be portals into divine activity. The gods spoke through dreams, but man had to work hard to figure out their meanings.

This explains why the cupbearer and the baker in this passage are not upset by the content of their dreams, but because there is no dream expert handy to give them an interpretation. Understanding their dreams was especially important because they probably were hoping for some insight into how their imprisonment would be resolved. Maybe the dreams they share with Joseph could reveal whether they would be prosecuted or exonerated, and how long they would be incarcerated.

We are never told why the cupbearer and the baker are in prison, but they are important and high-ranking officials and Joseph is told to serve them. The cupbearer was one of Pharaoh's most highly trusted men and was in charge of tasting everything served to Pharaoh to protect him from being poisoned. The baker was probably Pharaoh's head chef, so he too would have been accountable for ensuring that Pharaoh's food was protected from sabotage. We can only speculate, but perhaps there was some attempt at assassination, and the baker was guilty of involvement. We only know that the baker's punishment was extreme; he was likely beheaded or stoned to death, and his body was

displayed publicly on a stake. Desecration of the body like this was reserved only for the vilest offenders.

I think the main reason we are not told why these men are in prison with Joseph is that those facts are simply not important. The dreams themselves are not all that important, either. What is important is that Joseph gives witness to the one, true, living God in the midst of this pagan society. When Joseph offers to hear the men's dreams, he says, "Don't all interpretations belong to God?" It's hard for us 3,900 years to pick up on this, but his statement is daring and audacious. In those few words, Joseph claims that his God, the sole Hebrew God, is superior to all the Egyptian gods, the Pharaoh's dream experts, and by extension Pharaoh himself.

But the men are desperate, and have nothing to lose, so they take Joseph up on his offer. We have to keep in mind, though, that Joseph never claims to be a dream expert. He witnesses to the reality that his God is sovereign over everything, including dreams, and if God chose to reveal His will through Joseph, it was a gift. Both here and in upcoming chapters, Joseph does not take credit for his abilities, but gives the glory to God alone.

So as you know, Joseph interprets the dreams, and his interpretations prove to be true. The only thing he asks for is to be remembered by the cupbearer, so he can attain his freedom. While the English here does mean that the cupbearer forgot Joseph, the Hebrew also has the sense that Joseph was ignored or disregarded. Despite his plea for help, we learn from chapter 41 that Joseph would spend two more years in prison.

As I mentioned, one of the main points of this chapter is Joseph's example of witnessing to the one true God in the midst of a pagan society. The second major theme leads us to revisit God's use of circumstances to accomplish His will through His sovereign power. In this case, Joseph meets Pharaoh's right hand man, the cupbearer. Joseph would not have met the cupbearer, or had the chance to interpret his dreams, if Potiphar's wife had not seduced him. All in all in the big picture, it was not an accident that Joseph was in prison. There, he met the man who eventually would be instrumental in freeing him. As we'll explore in coming weeks, when Joseph is freed, he soon rises to become Pharaoh's right hand man. In the midst of these discouraging, difficult

circumstances, even though Joseph was unaware of it, God was at work to lead Joseph where God wanted to place him.

The same is often true for you and me. Even when we cannot see God's hand orchestrating our lives, we cannot hear His voice guiding us, and we may be tremendously frustrated and discouraged about our circumstances, Joseph's example reminds us of God's abiding presence. The Lord's presence with us is not only to bring us comfort and peace. As with Joseph, the Lord's presence works through us to witness to others about His truth, and impact others as we serve them in His name. No matter how difficult and challenging your struggles may be, God is working in you, and through you, so everyone you touch may know more of His love and mercy.

The third lesson we can take from this chapter today ties in to what Joseph does not do when his fellow prisoners desire someone to interpret their dreams. He doesn't say, "Let's ask Potiphar if some of the dream experts may visit us." He doesn't say, "Let's consult your gods," or "Let's keep track of the stars to see what astrological signs may tell us." No. He simply declares that his God is sovereign and completely sufficient to meet their needs, and points them to the one, true God. Joseph sees that the past, present, and future are in God's hands, so consulting anybody or anything else is a waste of time.

The same is true for us today. Everything that we need to know about how to live is written for us in God's Word. If there is something in God's Word we don't understand, we turn to the Holy Spirit to guide us. We may turn to others who have more experience in studying God's Word, but their guidance is still always subject to the Holy Spirit as He helps us to discern truth. When I meditate on the Scriptures and spend time with the Lord in prayer, He may speak to my heart to direct me, but He will never instruct me to do something that contradicts His Word. I may even have a dream like Joseph does, but if the Lord directs me to do something contrary to Scripture, then the dream is not from God. It is either a product of my imagination or has been tinged by demonic influence, and I should pray for cleansing and protection from Satan.

What this means, practically speaking, is that Christians have no need whatsoever to read horoscopes, have anything to do with astrology, or consult psychics. The only One we need to consult about our lives is Jesus Christ. Not only that, the Scriptures expressly command believers not to be involved at all in those spiritual practices. There

are numerous passages throughout the Bible that condemn astrology and psychics, but I'll take an example from Deut. 18, when God is preparing the Israelites to go into the Promised Land:

“When you enter the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there. Let no one be found among you ... who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the LORD, and because of these detestable practices the LORD your God will drive out those nations before you. You must be blameless before the LORD your God. The nations you will dispossess listen to those who practice sorcery or divination. But as for you, the LORD your God has not permitted you to do so.”

Now someone might say to me, “Rachel, I just read the horoscopes for fun,” or, “I just watch the psychics on TV because I'm curious and it's entertaining.” My response would be, “please find other, better ways to have fun.” From God's perspective, it's not fun. People who write horoscopes or promote psychic practices are expressly opposing God's will. The time a Christian spends reading horoscopes or opening themselves to psychics would be spent a million times more profitably by spending time with the Lord and reading His Word. If I go to a restaurant and have the choice of filet mignon or Spam for the same price, sure, I could pick Spam. But why would I? It's far healthier for me, and far more enjoyable, to turn to the Lord and ask Him what He may have in mind for me.

But there is a far more important issue than whether reading horoscopes or consulting psychics is fun. There are people and even some Christians who think it's harmless. If it were truly harmless, God would not expressly forbid believers to take part in it. When anyone participates in astrology or divination of any kind, they open themselves up to demonic influences and give Satan a foothold. Maybe the first time it seems harmless, or even the second and the third. But if the Lord opposes these practices, and the Scriptures clearly identify them with Satan, why would we even want to go there?

But by far the most critical reason to avoid any kind of astrology or psychic activity is that it displeases the Lord. Even if someone still tells me that it's just for fun and is harmless, if it displeases the Lord, why do it? Our lives are so short—why waste time on

such fruitless things? Either Jesus Christ is the perfect revelation of God, the Word made flesh, or He's not good enough and we need to consult our horoscopes or psychics. God's power must not be supreme, since we must need to consult demonic powers, too. If we involve ourselves in those practices, we're saying by implication that God's Word and the Holy Spirit aren't sufficient to guide us, and it doesn't really matter what God desires for us or what He commands us.

This is why Joseph does not ask for the dream experts, or encourage the cupbearer and the baker to consult the stars. God's wisdom and guidance were sufficient for Joseph, and they are more than sufficient for us. From God's perspective, astrology and psychics are not fun or harmless, but are detestable practices. Kings such as Saul were described as unfaithful to the Lord in 1 and 2 Chronicles because they consulted spiritists and practiced divination. Jeremiah 10 calls them worthless practices. In the New Testament, sorcerers are equated with false prophets. When Paul addresses a sorcerer named Elymas in Acts 13, we are told that Paul was filled with the Holy Spirit and said, "You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord?"

Like Joseph, we need to consult only the Lord and rely upon only Him for everything we need, including knowledge of the future. Despite how grim and uncertain his situation seemed, Joseph rested in the fact that God was in control, and God gave him all the knowledge he needed from day to day. The Lord explains this to us in Isaiah 8, which says,

"When someone tells you to consult mediums and spiritists, who whisper and mutter, should not a people instead inquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living? Consult God's instruction and His testimony of warning. If anyone does not speak according to this word, they have no light.... The LORD Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy; He is the one you are to revere. Bind up this testimony of warning and seal up God's instruction among my disciples. I will wait for the LORD; I will put my trust in him alone."

Let us pray...