

PARASHAH THIRTY-SEVEN

GENESIS 40:1–23; AMOS 1:3–2:6; MATTHEW 5:1–16

notes by Tim Hegg

My Times are in Your Hands

In 1842 the hymn writer William Lloyd penned these words:

My times are in thy hand; My God, I wish them there;
My life, my friends, my soul, I leave entirely to your care;
My times are in thy hand; Whatever they may be;
Pleasing or painful, dark or bright, as best may seem to thee;
My times are in thy hand; Why should I doubt or fear?
My Father's hand will never cause His child a needless tear.
My times are in thy hand; Yeshua the Crucified;
Those hands my cruel sins had pierced
are now my guard and guide.

The story of Joseph reminds us again and again of God's faithful care, and of the manner in which, in His mysterious providence, He guards and guides our lives for our good and His glory. Yet this does not mean that a life of faith is necessarily one of comfort. In God's abounding wisdom, He brings us through trials in order to strengthen our ability to trust Him, and to make us more and more like His Son, Yeshua. But in order for the trials to have their proper effect, we must begin with basic premise that everything God does is good, and that He controls the events of our lives. Only when we face trials with a steadfast trust in His goodness, are we able to be tempered by the heat rather than broken.

As we read this *parashah*, we are immediately confronted with God's all encompassing providence ordering the affairs of men. But we find Joseph in prison. God is working out His plan through means we could have never imagined.

Our text opens with the words, וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה, "and it happened after these things." Once again, the exact time-frame is illusive. We know that Joseph was 17 years old when his brothers sold him into slavery (37:1) and that he was 30 years old when he was put into Pharaoh's court as second-in-command (41:46). We also know that Joseph remained in prison for two years after the cupbearer was returned to his post (41:1). How much time Joseph spent in the house of Potipher before being put into prison is not stated. So we have no sure calculation of how much time he spent in prison. We do know that it was more than two years, however, and we should most likely presume it was longer than that. It took some time for Joseph to prove himself to the chief jailer, and to be given a place of authority within the prison (39:21ff; 40:3–4). Moreover, the cupbearer and baker who were also confined in prison were there for "some time" (v. 4, יָמִים, literally "days"). The expression "days" can mean "a year." Note, e.g., that the "yearly sacrifice" is called זֶבַח הַיָּמִים, "sacrifice of days" in 1Sam 1:21; (cf. 1Sam 2:19; 20:6; 27:7; Ex 13:10). Some of the Sages reckon that the cupbearer and baker were imprisoned a year before they had their dreams (cf. Rashi, Rashbam). So while our narrative compacts the story in terms of its chronology, we should remember that at this point Joseph has been in prison for a long time, at least for years.

Consider what might have been going through Joseph's mind, or what your thoughts might have been given a similar scenario. Incarcerated in a foreign prison on trumped up charges, it would be easy to grow bitter and angry. And given the fact that no end of this imprisonment was in sight, one would constantly have to fight the feelings of despair. Yet we have every sense that Joseph's trust in God was firm. Regardless of the lapse of time, he put his faith in the God who

owns time, and orders all things to bring about His purpose. Our appreciation of Joseph's faith continues to grow!

Moses is writing this narrative with true artistry. The one called the "dreamer" by his brothers is now to be given the opportunity to interpret dreams. And though the prison is variously referred to as "the house of the captain of the bodyguard," "the jail (בֵּית הַסֵּהָר)," and "house (v. 14)," it is finally called a "dungeon," which is actually the Hebrew word for "pit" (בּוֹר, *bor*), the same word used for the pit into which Joseph was thrown at the beginning of our story. Joseph describes his life as literally "in the pits." Moreover, the interpretation of the dreams also involves a clear play on words. The chief cupbearer would have his head "lifted up," meaning that he would be exalted (cf. Ps 3:3). Yet the addition of a prepositional phrase turns the same expression into disaster for the baker. The interpretation of his dream was that Pharaoh would "lift up your head *from you*," which is an entirely different matter!

In fact, the whole story of Joseph involves the issue of exultation, but not as one would imagine. Before Joseph is exulted, he is first humiliated and taken through years of hardship. Yet God is with him at each step of the way, and He is with him in the Egyptian prison he called a "pit."

Our story is well known: while Joseph is in prison, the royal cupbearer and baker "sinned" against Pharaoh. That terminology itself reminds us that in the Egyptian culture, the Pharaoh was considered a deity. In a sense, the cupbearer and baker poked their finger in the eye of their god. What did they do? No one knows, but one could guess that a particular meal was not up to the Pharaoh's standards. One could further speculate that the Pharaoh may have become ill after eating, and he may have thought that an attempted assassination was carried out by those who served the food. Perhaps later he found out that the culprit was the baker, and not the cupbearer.

Nonetheless, the two were put in prison with Joseph, and "some time" later, they both had dreams. Here, again, Moses is showing us that God is in control: the dreams are clearly of divine origin, because they foretell the future, and they do so accurately. Moreover, since there were two individuals from Pharaoh's court, the matter of the dreams and their interpretation could never be viewed as coincidental. Both the dreams themselves, and Joseph's ability to properly interpret them, was clearly seen as coming from God. "In the mouths of two or three a matter is confirmed."

Typical of dreams recorded in the biblical record, both the cupbearer and the baker have dreams that involve numbers. The cupbearer saw a vine with three branches that produced good grapes. He took the grapes, squeezed them into Pharaoh's cup, and put it into his hand. The baker likewise saw three baskets of "white bread" upon his head (חֹלִי, *choli*, is only used here, and describes bread made of wheat flour rather than of barley or other grains). The top basket contained other baked foods as well. In addition, the birds were eating food from the top basket.

So the they come to Joseph for an interpretation. Why they thought Joseph could help them in this matter is not clear, but perhaps they recognized him as a spiritual man. Joseph's reply when asked to interpret the cupbearer's dream is interesting (v. 8), "Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell me your dream." At first it appears that the phrase "do not interpretations belong to God" is meant as "who do you think I am, to interpret dreams—only God can do that!" But when it is immediately followed up with "tell me your dream," we get another sense: Joseph, being the only one in the prison who knew the true God, was therefore the only one able to offer an interpretation.

The interpretation of the dreams is favorable to the cupbearer, but disastrous to the baker. The cupbearer would be restored in three days, but the baker would be hung and the birds would eat his flesh. Once again, we are not privy to what was going on in Pharaoh's court, we only see the results: one official is restored, and another rejected. But what we know for sure is that Joseph's God is in control!

Joseph, having realized through the cupbearer's dream that he would be restored in favor to Pharaoh, asked a simple request (v. 14): "Only keep me in mind when it goes well with you, and

please do me a kindness (חֶסֶד, *chesed*) by mentioning (זָכַר, *zachar*, “to remember”) me to Pharaoh and get me out of this house.” Joseph’s willingness to help interpret the cupbearer’s dream deserved a kindness in return. The use of *chesed* and the verb *zachar* cast the request in covenant language. We never hear if the cupbearer agrees, but it wouldn’t have mattered: he forgets Joseph after returning to Pharaoh’s court. Yet the language of v. 23 is interesting because it appears redundant: “Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him.” Why does it add “but forgot him” when it was already stated that he “did not remember Joseph?” The answer is most likely that the cupbearer did not forget Joseph in the sense of neglect, but rather in the sense of not honoring a covenant. The cupbearer makes a conscious choice *not to mention* Joseph to Pharaoh. Perhaps he felt his newly reinstated position was still too tenuous for him to ask favors of his Master—he didn’t want to bring up anything that had to do with his former prison term!

But more than that, God intends that Joseph would have a face-to-face meeting with the Pharaoh himself—no go-betweens. The position that Joseph would occupy, and which would be necessary in order both to save the lives of his father and family, as well as bring them eventually to Egypt, would require an event in which Pharaoh himself would become beholden to Joseph. And we know that event would also involve a dream.

Interestingly, though Joseph was able to interpret the dreams of others, God had not yet given him knowledge of what his immediate future would hold. He hopes that the cupbearer would be his ticket out of the Egyptian “pit.” And one could imagine that he waited anxiously for days and days after the cupbearer was reinstated. But finally, Joseph no doubt realized that the cupbearer would not help him—the next chapter begins, “Now after two full years....” Rejected and sold by his brothers, framed by his master’s wife, and now forgotten by the cupbearer—we can only imagine how Joseph might have felt. Still, we may also imagine that Joseph relied yet again upon the God he could not see, but Who was nonetheless with him.

The *haftarah* portion of the prophets attached to this *parashah* in the triennial cycle includes the woe oracles of the prophet Amos. To his prophetic oracle of judgment against Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Ammon, and Moab are added similar oracles against Judah and Israel. It is the oracle against Israel that ties it to our portion: “Thus says the LORD, ‘For three transgressions of Israel and for four I will not revoke its punishment, because they sell the righteous for money and the needy for a pair of sandals’ (Amos 2:6). The sin of greed and selfishness, demonstrated in Joseph’s brothers, carried on from generation to generation, eventually characterized the nation in the day Amos (760 BCE).

When Amos charges Israel with “selling the righteous for money,” he is speaking of bribing judges. Those who are suppose to be “righteous” and establish righteousness in the land, are bought and sold through the bribes of the wicked. Yet the wording itself reminded the Sages of Joseph: the righteous one is sold for money.

The connection to the Apostolic portion chosen for this *parashah* is also clear: “Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Surely Joseph was persecuted for being righteous, and so he presents to us an example to follow.

That, of course, is the application of this *parashah*. How would we have fared in Joseph’s circumstances? Would we have continued to foster a growing trust in God and His goodness in spite of the fact that the circumstances in which we found ourselves looked very grim? The trials we face in life offer us the same opportunity as Joseph had, to live out what we know to be true of God.

Adonai, You who gives meaning to the strivings of men, attune our hearts for communion with You. How often, when everything else fails us, do we yearn for You. In the stillness of the night, in the press of the crowd, in the agony of inner conflict, we bow our heads, and know that You are with us and we are at peace. We know not, O God, whether the gifts for which we ask are for our good, whether our trials and tribulations may not be blessings in disguise, whether

even the fragment of our shattered hopes and love may not minister to the upbuilding of other lives and the fulfilment of Your unfathomable plan. So we do not pray unto You to make our lives easy, to give us happiness without alloy. Rather do we pray You to aid us to be uncomplaining and unafraid. Teach us to face life with faith and courage that we may see the blessings hidden away even in its discords and struggles. Help us to wrest victory from the discipline of pain. May we realize that life calls us not merely to enjoy the fatness of the earth but to exult in the heights attained after the toil of climbing. Thus will our darkness be illumined by Your light and our weakness made strong by Your strength, lifting us above fear and defeat, and sustaining our steps with an immortal hope. Praised are You, Adonai, the stay and trust of the righteous.

(adapted from *The Union Prayerbook*, p. 335)

Some additional notes on the Hebrew text of the *parashah*:

v. 3 - שַׂר הַטְּבָחִים – “captain of the bodyguard.” The verb טָבַח means “to slaughter,” and usually in the sense of “slaughter an animal for food.” The verb thus also came to mean “to cook.” In this case, however, the word most likely means “to execute” (i.e., to slaughter a person) and it may be that the prison or dungeon into which Joseph was placed was a holding place for those who were sentenced to be executed.

v. 4 - וַיִּשְׁרֵת אֹתָם – “and he [Joseph] took care of them” – the verb שָׁרַת usually means “to minister to someone,” “to serve” and is most often used in connection with the service of the priests in the Tabernacle/Temple. Its use here would indicate that Joseph did more than simply watch over the cupbearer and baker. He served them by attending to their needs, and this is a narrative marker that foreshadows Joseph’s primary service to them by means of interpreting their dreams.

v. 6 – וַהֲנֵם זָעֵפִים – “behold, they were dejected.” The verb זָעַף is found only here and in Dan 1:10.

v. 7 – מַדּוּעַ פְּנֵיכֶם רְעִים הַיּוֹם – “Why are your faces so sad today?” Here is a good illustration of the wide meaning of רָע, usually understood as “evil” or “bad.” But the word does not necessarily connote moral or ethical failure. Joseph’s question is akin to our English “what’s wrong?”

v. 13 – וַהֲשִׁיבְךָ עַל-כַּנְּךָ – “and restore you to your office.” The use of כַּן (כַּנְּךָ), here translated as “your office” would be more literally “your place,” where the root כָּן is cognate to כּוֹן, “to establish” or “to be set in place.” Note Arabic *makan*, “place, position, rank.”

v. 15 – כִּי-גִנַּב גִּנְבֹתַי מֵאֶרֶץ הָעִבְרִים – “for surely I was kidnapped from the land of the Hebrews” – The use of גִּנַּב, which means “to steal,” here clearly denotes kidnapping, and it was on the basis of texts such as this (cf. also Ex 21:16; 22:11; Deut 24:7) that the Sages interpreted this verb in the Ten Words also to denote kidnapping, particularly since it is grouped among those offences that draw the death penalty (murder and adultery). Here we may also derive an extension of the commandment forbidding kidnapping, for though the traveling merchants purchased Joseph from his brothers as a slave, they acquired “stolen” property since the brothers had no right to sell Joseph. As such, the merchants are guilty of kidnapping, for they are complicit in the illegal activity. A further extension: purchasing items known to have been stolen is one and the same with the theft itself.

כִּי־שָׂמוּ אֹתִי בַּבּוֹר – “that they put me in the pit” – Here, בּוֹר refers to the prison or “dungeon” in which Joseph has been cast, but the word itself is used in the narrative to tie this event back to the initial “pit” into which Joseph’s brothers threw him. In a narrative sense, his brothers are also culpable for his current incarceration.

v. 16 – הָרִי – “white bread,” found only here in the Tanach. The Arabic *chuwwara* means “white,” and the term has been found in Egyptian Aramaic texts. This was probably bread made from sifted wheat flour, cf. Hebrew סֶלֶת.

v. 19 – וְאָכַל הָעוֹף אֶת־בְּשָׂרְךָ מֵעַלְיָךְ – literally, “and the bird will eat your flesh from upon you.” The singular עוֹף is a good example of a collective singular, thus the meaning is “and the birds will eat....”

v. 22 – וַיֹּאֲת שֵׁר הָאֲפִים תָּלָה – “and the chief of the bakers he hanged” Following the vav consecutives (vav + imperfect) of v. 21, the object is put first in the clause for emphasis, which thus requires a return to the perfect aspect (תָּלָה) in the consecutive chain of verbs.