

Genesis 39:21-40:23, No. 64

“Living in the Truth”

August 27, 2017

The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn

v.23 The Lord was with Joseph, not to protect him from distress but in the midst of his distress. You will notice how closely the language here parallels that of 39:2-6. That similarity emphasizes that, despite all appearances, God was on Joseph’s side as much in the prison as before in the comfort and prosperity of Potiphar’s house.

v.4 In 39:1 Potiphar was identified as the “captain of the guard.” Is history repeating itself: Potiphar once again trusting Joseph with his most important business?

The cup-bearer was not only the wine-taster of the king – who in those days always feared being poisoned – but was often, for that reason, a trusted adviser and confidant. Nehemiah – the cup-bearers were often foreigners in the ANE, precisely because they were less likely to be involved in intrigues against the king – held a similar position, if you remember. Egyptian materials from the period attest to the wealth and influence of such individuals. What they did that offended the king is not said, for it doesn’t matter to the narrative. We don’t know how much time is indicated by the “sometime later” in v. 1, though we can calculate that Joseph was at this time approximately 28 years of age. He has been a slave for 11 years but how many years working for Potiphar and how many in prison we can’t say. [Sarna, 276-277]

v.7 Human sympathy opened the way for all that follows. It often leads to remarkable things still today.

v.8 These dreams were unsettling precisely because, unlike most dreams, they came with a character, a vividness that set them apart and left the unmistakable impression that they meant something. I suspect the dreams that are leading many Muslims to Christ these days are like that. But what did these dreams mean? Joseph rejected the occult practices of the ancient world, but he knew very well that God knew the meaning of these dreams and could reveal it if he chose. Interpretation of such dreams was not a human art, it was a divine gift!

v.14 We are not told either how soon after hearing the dream Joseph gave its interpretation or how Joseph learned what the dream meant, but he had no doubt he had interpreted the dream correctly.

v.15 Joseph wanted the cupbearer to know that in helping him he would be helping an innocent man.

v.17 The dictionary of Egyptian from this period lists 38 different kinds of cake and 57 varieties of bread. The Egyptians were first-class gourmets.

- v.19 That is, the baker would be executed *and* his body exposed afterward. This treatment was designed to prevent his spirit from resting in the afterlife.
- v.23 We read in v. 1 of the next chapter that Joseph remained in the prison, with his disappointed hopes, for two long years after the cup-bearer was restored to his office.

As a human story of hopes raised, then dashed, this account is as universal as the story of the scorned woman seeking revenge in the last chapter. We are also given some more insight into Joseph's own character: Where did this strong faith come from in that mess of a family in which he was raised? We are not told, but we see here a man with deep and abiding sympathy for and interest in two fellow prisoners under his charge.. We also see his sturdy faith in God. Not only do we find him interpreting dreams by looking to the Lord for the meaning of them, but the statement in 39:21 – literally, “the Lord was with Joseph and was loyal to him” – suggests, in the terminology itself, in a way that would take too long to explain, that Joseph was a man of prayer. [Wenham, ii, 381] He looked to God for help in this moment. He was a man whose success in life – whether in Potiphar's house or in the prison itself – resulted from his walking with God and trusting in God, and he knew that.

It is a universal story also in this, that Joseph's prayer for deliverance from prison was not answered, at least for a long time. Experienced Christians can only too well imagine him in that prison, as the days passed and, as must certainly have been the case, after the story of the cup-bearer's restoration to the court circulated back to the prison itself. The days became weeks, the weeks months, the months a year. Joseph now knew that the cup-bearer had forgotten him; no deliverance would come from that direction. His prayers had gone unanswered. How like the experience of God's people that is! “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?” [Psalm 13:1]

But, there is a larger truth looming over this very human experience, this entirely human anxiety and longing, so long unfulfilled. The fact is, because he knew the living God, Joseph knew the truth about life and about the world and about man and salvation, while those who prospered as the world counted prosperity, did not.

In the ancient near eastern world dreams were thought to come from the gods and to reveal the divine will. The interpretation of dreams was thought to be a science and was placed in the hands of learned specialists. This was everywhere the case in the ANE and there are examples of it not only in the Bible – as here and in the Book of Daniel, for example – but in the materials of the ANE world as archaeology has brought them to light. The majority of the texts in the library of the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal, was devoted to the subject of divination, the discovery by occult means of the will of the gods. The interpretation of dreams was but one of these means. Hepatoscopy, or the examination of livers taken from the bodies of animals, was another important method. The excavations at Mari, a community near in time to Joseph, produced dozens of clay models that served as guides to the prognosticators. They showed livers of particular shapes and appearances and bore inscriptions detailing the sort of events that had occurred after the inspection of a liver that looked like that. The horoscope, the examination of heavenly bodies, did not appear as a means of divination until much later, during the Persian

period. All of this was of great importance in the ancient world, for success and prosperity were thought to depend upon a king aligning his plans with the will of the gods.

Divination was, of course, thought particularly important in time of war and the armies of the ANE world had diviners as part of their general staff. If the omens were unfavorable, only the foolhardy would disregard them. One tablet at Mari reads:

“I and Ibbi-Amurru have been preparing for the campaign of Warad-Ilishu at Agdamatum, but our omens are not favorable. These omens I have sent my lord. May my lord pay very close attention to these omens.” [This and much of the above two paragraphs from Harrison, *Old Testament Times*, 64, 71]

It is eerie, in a way, to see how small a distance we have traveled from the second millennium B.C. In our world too it is thought essential for business and government to know the future. We don't speak of divination, but much of what we do has the same object and the practice of predicting the future is, also in our day, entrusted to so-called experts. What is more, the likelihood that the experts will have prognosticated correctly is probably no greater today than it was in the Egypt of Joseph's day. Those people were no fools. They rarely let a liver keep an army from attacking an enemy anyone could tell was no match, or from making a treaty with a king everyone knew was too powerful to resist. I read, not long ago, that American banks had laid off many of their economists because the economists' track-record suggested that they weren't any better able to predict the future of the markets and the economy than anyone else. And speaking of war-making, I'm reading a history of the Korean War. In so many ways it was the disaster it came to be because the military intelligence, the prognostication of the experts regarding the plans of the enemy was so notoriously inept. They were, as it turned out, only guessing and they guessed wrong virtually every time! In the same way most intelligence agencies did not predict the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989 and it turned out that there were no WMDs in Iraq, whose existence was the putative cause of our going to war.

What is also an interesting intersection between that world and our own is the effort to interpret dreams. There was more attention paid to the interpretation of dreams in the 20th century than in any century since ancient times. This practice of divination by the interpretation of dreams was nonsense, of course, and so was most of the interpretation of dreams in modern psychiatry. Whether it is ads on TV for psychic readings or Freudian dream-interpretation, it is amazing how similar the modern world is to that of ancient Egypt! Everyone wants to know the future because he or she thinks such knowledge will enable him or her to be wealthy, successful, or happy in the present.

And that puts the lesson of the chapter in still sharper focus. For what you have clearly, what is obviously the narrator's intention here, especially in v. 8, in the statement we might call the narrator's *evaluative viewpoint* in the passage, is the contrast drawn between the so-called “interpretations” of the Egyptian diviners, and the actual knowledge of the future that God imparted to Joseph. God knew what the dreams meant, but he alone knew.

This contrast is going to be made again, in even greater detail, in the next chapter, where Pharaoh's magicians and wise men are revealed to have had no real knowledge of the plans and

purposes of God, but Joseph knew precisely what they were because God had revealed them to him. See and feel the irony of it. The Egyptian experts, with their livers and their theories of the meaning of dreams, pontificating in the splendor of the court – everyone hanging on their every word – actually didn't have a clue what as to what any of this meant. But the truth, the real meaning of things, and how the future would unfold, only God's man knew that. And where was he? In jail; unknown, unrecognized, and soon completely forgotten again, even by the man who had heard him predict the future with perfect accuracy.

But such things as dreams and predicting the deliverance of the cup-bearer and the execution of the baker are merely demonstrations of a far wider, deeper knowledge, the knowledge that Christians know because God has revealed it to them in his Word and convinced them of its truth by his Spirit. Joseph knew the living God, the Egyptians did not. They worshipped Amun. So seriously did the Egyptians take Amun they built an immense temple to him at Karnak on the Nile. It was 300 acres in size. You could put the greatest cathedrals of Europe into a corner of it. It takes eleven adult men holding hands to get around one of its columns. They called it heaven on earth. But no one worships Amun anymore! Amun was a figment of Egyptian imagination. Joseph knew of the living God's covenant with man and how sinful men could have fellowship with God; the Egyptians did not. Joseph knew the will of God, his law and commandments (as we saw in the previous chapter), the Egyptians did not.

He was in jail, not the court where the "experts" could be found, but he knew the truth and they hadn't a clue! *And so it is throughout Holy Scripture*: the natural mind, Paul says, cannot understand the things of the Spirit, for they are spiritually discerned. He also says that the world, through its wisdom, does not know God; the way of peace they do not know, which is to say they don't know anything genuinely important and they certainly don't know the future.

You realize, of course, that we live in a time when the largest number of people in our country, including people who confess to be Christians, find that claim simply outrageous. Many of them are deeply offended by the suggestion that Christians know the truth about human life, about God, man, and salvation, truth that the rest of the world does not have. A few years ago the Southern Baptist Mission Board urged its members to pray and work for the conversion of the Jews to Christianity, to love them as a Christian might love an unsaved relative. Jewish leaders, predictably offended, responded by saying such things as "We'd like a little less love and little more respect."

But, of course, a Christian must take that position. And the Jews should know that the Jewish prophets took the same position. There was a true view of God and a false view of God and it mattered for time and eternity which view one embraced and practiced in life. What is more, in the Bible, in the OT and NT alike, truth is typically known to only a minority, sometimes a small minority of human beings. Further, of course, is the inconsistency, really the hypocrisy of those who are offended, since everyone else thinks in precisely the same way about the things they care about. The progressive wants to convert everyone to his or her way of thinking about sexual liberty or government policy, because *they know* their thinking is right and everyone else's is wrong. The political conservative thinks similarly though he or she is sure that the progressive is wrong about most things.

But it is hard for people today to acknowledge even such obvious facts. They no longer, they hardly *can* any longer reckon with logic or truth itself, certainly not in regard to religious claims. Even the postmodernists accept absolute truth at many other points. They don't want relativists, for example, people who believe that all viewpoints are equally valid, and any road as good as any other, in charge of Air Traffic Control! They give away their position as well with their ethical absolutism. The demonizing of those who have Christian sexual ethics, for example, by people who ostensibly believe that what we call "truth" is actually just personal opinion, is hypocrisy pure and simple, however often emblazoned on the front pages of our newspapers and in our television talk shows. Our modern pundits think they know what people *ought* to think and *ought* to do. But, as C.S. Lewis pointed out long ago, "When men say, 'I ought,' they certainly think they are saying something, and something true about the nature of the proposed action, and not merely about their own feelings. But if naturalism is true, if life is an accident, if matter is all there is, if there is no infinite personal God, 'I ought' is the same sort of statement as 'I itch' or 'I'm going to be sick.'" [*Miracles*, 36] If postmodernism is true, the jihadist suicide bomber has as much right to his opinions as the crusader for gay marriage.

Nevertheless, no matter the blatant inconsistency, no matter the illogical reasoning, in regard to religious claims, in regard to God and in regard to the ultimate outcome of human life, multitudes of people in our culture, even within Christendom, now maintain that opinion is all anyone has and that every opinion is as good as any other, *except* that opinion that claims an exclusive and absolute truth, valid for everyone, against which all other human ideas and theories are found wanting. But the fact of the matter is Joseph's interpretation was correct, and things happened as he said they would. That's truth. Why should Christians not see this cultural movement as simply another form of the age old rebellion against God that has explained the thinking of human beings from the Tower of Babel to the *Origin of the Species*?

What is really being rejected here, of course, is the idea that men must submit to God, that his truth is truth for everyone at all times, and that there will be a judgment according to that truth. Christianity would not be so offensive if there wasn't bad news in it as well. No one objects to absolutist claims to universally good news. But in Christianity there is not only the deliverance of the cup-bearer, but there is the execution of the baker. There is the rub! Christianity without the bad news of sin and divine judgement is as acceptable to this culture as any other view. But Christianity as we find it in the Bible and the teaching of Jesus Christ is another story altogether. "There is but one name under heaven given among men whereby they must be saved." *And to silence that voice, the loss of the idea of truth itself is apparently not too small a price to pay.*

It was to counter this very tendency to deny that there is such a thing as absolute truth, truth that is the same for everyone, that Francis Schaeffer in the 1960s and 70s used to speak – when the problem wasn't nearly as severe as it is now – of "true truth," precisely to emphasize, both to Christian and non-Christian alike, what Christianity in fact asserts: that there was truth, truth that was valid for all men at all times, truth that God had revealed and that could be known, truth which is the standard against which all the other thinking of human being must be measured. There was nothing new in that claim, of course, but it was in danger of being overwhelmed by the relativism of the modern world.

It is precisely the claim we make – we cannot do otherwise and be faithful to Jesus Christ, who said, “I am the way, *the truth*, and the life” – that there is truth, truth with a capital “T” and that it is true for everyone, has always been true and shall always be true and against which all the other opinions of human life are judged to be in error. To deny that there is such truth, truth by which all the opinions of men must be measured; I say, to deny that, is to deny the Bible, deny Jesus Christ, deny the prophets and the apostles, deny the entire history of Christianity, and deny the experience of vast multitudes of Christians who have found that truth and been set free by it, even though, in order to embrace it, in many cases they had to abandon long held and long cherished opinions.

This is why, in the NT, the apostles were so adamant about the preservation, appropriation, and propagation of Christian teaching: *it was the Truth!* And only by coming to know and embrace this truth can one come to know God and find eternal life. That’s the future everyone wants and needs to know – what’s going to happen to me in the future. And *this* is the truth about the future. And they made those claims in a world that was as religiously diverse as our own. Many people seem to imagine that it is only modern man’s flinty honesty in the face of dreadful dilemmas that the apostles knew nothing about that makes him unable to follow them in their unqualified and unabashed commitment to a single Truth. But the apostles knew exactly what they were saying. Indeed, there were far fewer Christians – in absolute numbers, of course, but also in percentage of the world’s population – in their day than there are in ours. It is outrageous to claim it is our new experience of religious pluralism that forces people in our day to hand over the very concept of truth, and along with it, the Christian faith in the form in which it has come down to us. Religious pluralism was as much a fact in the first century as it is in the 21st!

The Bible will have none of this. It has known from the outset that the truth may be known by a young man in prison and escape all the experts in an Egyptian court. And it was never surprised that human beings, in their sinful rebellion against God, would rather read livers or consult the stars, than bow down to the living God and hear Him. And so today, whether outside or inside Christendom, almost anything, however absurd, is taken seriously *except* the truth of God.

I don’t want any of you cowering, blanching before the propaganda that you are receiving virtually every moment of every day. I want you to see through all of this and realize how little of a challenge it actually represents to your faith. The ideas of our modern world are just as convincing to people today as heptoscopy and scientific dream interpretation were to the Egyptians. A god of their own devising is as convincing to people today as Amun was to the Egyptians. Modern man too has his theories about how to live one’s life, how to become successful and how to be happy. They too have their inventions, their techniques by which to seek knowledge of the future; they too consult the so-called experts. The situation we face as Christians today is really no different than the situation Joseph faced. The world in our day also has gone after nonsense – in the truest sense of the word – while the truth that sets men free would be kept in a dungeon if the world had its way. They will build an immense temple to Amun, a god of their own imagination, a god made in their own image, but they want nothing to do with the living God. But where is heptoscopy and where is Amun today?

Still today one will never get to the Truth by counting noses – just as one couldn’t in Egypt, for all the vaunted sophistication of its magicians and fortune tellers. One will find it by turning to

the living God and listening to him. And just as then, so now, the truth will rise up and show itself to many people, now and again, like it did to Pharaoh's cup-bearer, but struck by it as they may be at the moment, they will forget it quickly enough.

But no one consults livers anymore, though millions upon millions consult the Bible; Freud and his dreams have already passed away – hardly a psychiatrist can be found who attempts to interpret your dreams – while the truth as it is in Jesus Christ stands and will stand forever. In the 17th century, Voltaire said that in a hundred years the Bible would be a forgotten book. His home in Paris today belongs to the French Bible Society and millions upon millions of French-speaking Africans rejoice to call Jesus Christ their Lord and Master.

And even if one didn't know how the history of Joseph would turn out, it is not hard to see that it is better to know the truth and the God of truth in prison, than to live according to falsehoods, however impressive, in the luxury and splendor of the Pharaoh's court.

For the fact is, my friends, things happened just as Joseph said they would. He did know the truth. And, ever since, events have unfolded just as God said they would. And the truth, as God has given it to us, has been put to the test by Christian people over thousands of years and has not been found once to fail, as one after another contrary opinion has come and gone. Philosophies come and go and if you can be sure about anything it is that the philosophies that now reign in the United State of America, the scientific theories, the ethical theories that are now so much the talk of our culture, will not be the same ones that people are talking about 50 years from now. Philosophies come and go, but the truth will always endure, as it has to this day. Joseph is a hero, Amun is a tourist destination. As Theodore Beza said in a letter to King Henry of France: "Sire, it belongs in truth to the Church of God, in the name of which I speak, to receive blows and to give them, but it will please your Majesty to take notice that it is an anvil which has worn out many hammers!"

Nothing is more certain than that, even though God's people must suffer for the truth, at the end God's truth will still be standing, when all efforts to replace it lie buried in the dust.