

**“GOD ONLY WISE”**

In last week’s passage, we saw how Joseph was unjustly thrown in prison as a result of his refusal to give in to temptation. Nevertheless, the Lord had not abandoned Joseph. He was still with him. And it was God’s presence with Joseph that enabled him to interpret the dreams of the two prisoners in this passage. Now, before we delve into our study of this passage, it is important to point out that some of the things that take place here are very unique. For one thing, the dreams of the cupbearer and baker were prophetic in nature. They were dreams that disclosed what was about to take place in the lives of these two men. This is not something that is true of most dreams. Dreams are not usually predictive prophecy. For another thing, Joseph was given the ability to correctly explain the predictive prophecy that was conveyed through the symbolism of these dreams. This was a unique ability that was only given to a few people in the history of redemption. It is important that we point these things out, lest we misunderstand the meaning of this passage for our lives today. For example, it would be wrong for us to think that, because God gave Joseph the ability to interpret these dreams in this particular instance, God’s people today should expect to have the same kind of ability. That is most definitely not what this passage has to say to us today. But this does not mean that it does not convey things that are just as relevant today as they were when Moses first wrote it. In terms of the broader context in Genesis, we can see how this story contributes to the overarching theme of God’s providential care for Joseph, and, through him, for the covenant people. God was working through Joseph’s dealings with these two men to

bring about his purposes in Joseph's life, even though Joseph could not at that time see how God was working. But even aside from this theme from the larger context of Joseph's story, there is another important truth conveyed to us in this passage. Joseph's dealings with these two men lays emphasis upon the fact that God is the source of all truth, and that his people have unique access to that truth by means of special revelation. Again, this does not mean that we should expect to be able to discern the hidden meanings of people's dreams today, but simply that as God's people we have been granted the great privilege of seeing things that the world in its blindness is incapable of seeing.

The two prisoners that Joseph deals with in this passage were important officials in Pharaoh's court. Those who served as cupbearers and bakers to kings were persons of high-rank in the ancient world. The cupbearer in particular would have been much more than just a wine-taster. He would have been a trusted advisor to Pharaoh, at least until he fell out of favor with him. We do not know what it was that caused Pharaoh to be upset with these two men, but verse 1 tells us that they each committed some kind of offense that landed them in prison. Notice how this contrasts with what happened to Joseph. These men had done something wrong. There was a reason why they were thrown in prison. But not so with Joseph. He had done nothing wrong. Yet there he was right alongside the cupbearer and the baker.

On one night during their imprisonment, the two men had dreams that they believed contained some important insight into their plight. They believed that these dreams

contained, in words made famous by Doc Brown in *Back to the Future*, “information about the future.” Such notions were widely held by the ancient Egyptians, as well as other peoples of the ancient Near East. They believed that dreams could contain predictions about the future. The problem for the cupbearer and the baker was that they did not have access to the special dream-interpreters who were believed to have the ability to tell people what their dreams meant. Normally, they would have simply tracked down one of the many seers in Pharaoh’s palace and gotten an interpretation. But now that they were in prison they could not do that. They were understandably worried about their fate, and they were greatly dismayed at not being able to gain insight into what their dreams had to say about what was going to happen to them.

And so, when Joseph came to attend to these important prisoners in the morning after their dream, he could see that they were especially troubled. And at this point in the story, we are given two important glimpses into Joseph’s character. First of all, he showed genuine concern for these two men. He took notice of their sad countenances. He inquired about what it was that was so upsetting to them. He cared about them. And this from a man who easily could have said that he had enough troubles of his own. Joseph could have wallowed in self-pity over his circumstances, but he took the time to show his concern for these two prisoners.

The second glimpse into Joseph’s character comes in his response to what the cupbearer and baker told him about their dreams. He said, “Do not interpretations belong to God? Please tell them to me.” Joseph’s immediate impulse when he heard these men

talk about their superstitions was to point them to the one true God. This shows us that Joseph maintained a God-centered mindset while he was living among the Egyptians. And we see him acting in a similar manner at a number of other points during his time in Egypt. In the previous chapter, when Potiphar's wife tried to seduce him, Joseph said, "How can I sin against God?" In the next chapter, when Pharaoh asked him if he could interpret his dream, he gave all the credit to God. When his two sons Ephraim and Manasseh were born, he gave them names that expressed his faith in the Lord. And later, when he finally revealed himself to his brothers, he told them that it was the Lord's will that they sold him into Egypt. In all of this we see that Joseph was a man who walked with God. He was always looking for an opportunity to give glory to his God. When he saw the two chief officials looking so downcast, he seized this opportunity to show them that their dream-interpreters were charlatans and that the Lord is the true revealer of mysteries. Remember, Joseph could have been so consumed with self-pity that he failed to take this opportunity, but instead he sought to bring glory to God.

When Joseph interpreted the two dreams, he was speaking God's word of revelation. And, as a true prophet, he could only pronounce what he received from the Lord. This meant good news for the cupbearer, but bad news for the baker. Here is a good example of how God's faithful messengers speak his truth, even when that truth is unpleasant. This is something that should characterize the preaching of every minister of the gospel. Every Christian should pray for the Lord to raise up ministers who will faithfully

expound the Word that God has revealed, even when its message is not what people want to hear.

We see another characteristic of a faithful messenger of God in how Joseph was sincerely convinced of the truth of what he is saying. He had full confidence that what he said would in fact take place because he believed that the Lord was the source of his information. This was why he asked the cupbearer to be sure to remember him when he was restored. Joseph had no doubt that it would happen. And sure enough, both dreams were fulfilled exactly as Joseph said. The cupbearer was restored, while the baker was executed.

As I said earlier, the people of the ancient Near East took great interest in the art of divination, that is, in trying to discover the future, or the will of the gods, by using special techniques. Dream-interpretation was one such technique. Another was trying to read fortunes by examining animal livers. Of course, these sorts of things seem very primitive to us, but we need to realize that there is a sense in which our world is really quite similar to that of Joseph. What is magic, after all, except an attempt to control and direct our natural environment? J.R.R. Tolkien once defined magic as that which “produces, or pretends to produce, an alteration in the...world...[I]t is not an art but a technique; its desire is power in this world, domination of things and wills.” [“On Fairy-Stories” in *Tree and Leaf*] Our modern culture has its own beliefs about what will enable us to gain control over our natural environment. One of these is the unwavering faith that modern people have in the power of technology and experimental science. This faith leads people

to believe that there is no problem that cannot be solved, no disease that cannot be cured, no limit to what mankind can accomplish. Of course, this is not to say that technology and science are inherently evil. On the contrary, they have been a means through which the Lord has extended a great measure of his common grace blessings to mankind. But many people in our modern world seem to think that our technologies and techniques have made us into something like gods. For modern man, there is virtually nothing in this world that is mysterious or hidden or beyond his grasp. But this passage in Genesis speaks against this error. Joseph's dealings with Pharaoh's two officials shows us that man's silly attempts to try to have perfect knowledge and control over his life is doomed to fail. The dreams of the cupbearer and the baker were infallibly interpreted, not by the esteemed wise men of Egypt, but by the God of the Hebrews. As King Nebuchadnezzar would later confess to the prophet Daniel, there is only one God who is the revealer of mysteries.

Because God was with him, Joseph had access to the truth. He was able to reveal mysteries to the cupbearer and the baker. But how did the cupbearer thank him after he was released? He promptly forgot all about him. Joseph had to wait two more years before a situation arose that jogged the cupbearer's memory. Joseph continued to trust that God was with him, but he had to wait a long time before his prayers were answered. This is an experience that is shared at times by every believer. There are times in our lives when we want to cry out with the psalmist saying, "How long, O Lord ? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" [Ps. 13:1] I imagine that

Joseph prayed prayers like that at many points during his time in Egypt. He was hoping that the cupbearer would be his ticket out of prison and perhaps even out of Egypt, but his hopes were dashed. The Lord was still with him, but Joseph would have to let go of his own ideas about how his problems would be solved. The Lord was teaching him to place all of his trust in him.

This story illustrates where believers stand in relation to the unbelieving world. We have access to God's truth. We are the ones who know the will of God, at least to the extent that he has revealed it to us. Of course there is still much that we do not know, but we know far more than the people of the world do. They are in the dark. Like the cupbearer and the baker, the world has its ideas about how a person can find his way in life, but those ideas are every bit as misguided. The world's ideas about how man can take control of his life are like passing fads. What is accepted as common sense one day is seen as utterly ridiculous the next. There are very few people today who would take seriously the ancient Near Eastern world's attempts to gain insight through the study of animal livers and dreams. But the people of Joseph's day put a great deal of stock in such things. The world keeps on running after nonsense, while the people of God have the truth. And we often find ourselves in a position that is similar to that of Joseph as he sat in prison. He was a slave. He was in jail. He was nothing. The cupbearer quickly forgot him. The world often looks upon the church in the same way: weak, unimportant, insignificant, forgettable. But we have been entrusted with the gospel; we have the light that shines into the darkness of this lost world. Joseph did not know the answers to

everything, but he knew what really mattered. And so it is with everyone who trusts in Jesus Christ. There will be times when you, like Joseph in that prison, have no idea about what God is doing in your life. But even at such times, you have the truth of God, and that truth puts you in an entirely different position than the people around you who are stumbling around in the darkness of this lost world. As C.S. Lewis put it, “I believe in Christianity as I believe the sun has risen; not only because I can see it, but because by it I see everything else.”