

Interpretations Belong to God

Week two of a five-week series on “Resilience”

by the Rev. Jeremy F. Simons, Bryn Athyn, October 4, 2020

They said to him, “We each have had a dream, and there is no interpreter of it.” So Joseph said to them, “Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell them to me, please.” Genesis 40:8

Last week we heard how the Joseph story tells us about paying attention, about noticing what is going on with us and around us. Today our topic is about interpreting these things. The same events can seem different depending on the interpretation.

The butler and the baker were looking for someone to explain their dreams. Joseph said that interpretations belong to God. This insight is what makes all the difference. The same is true in our own lives. But how do we find interpretations from the Lord?

This is our topic as we continue with Joseph’s story in the second of a five-week series about “Resilience.”

Resilience, as we heard last week, is about “*adapting well in the face of adversity.*” Joseph’s story is an ideal illustration because he faced one situation after another that was harshly unfair, and yet he adapted well, and his story ended happily.

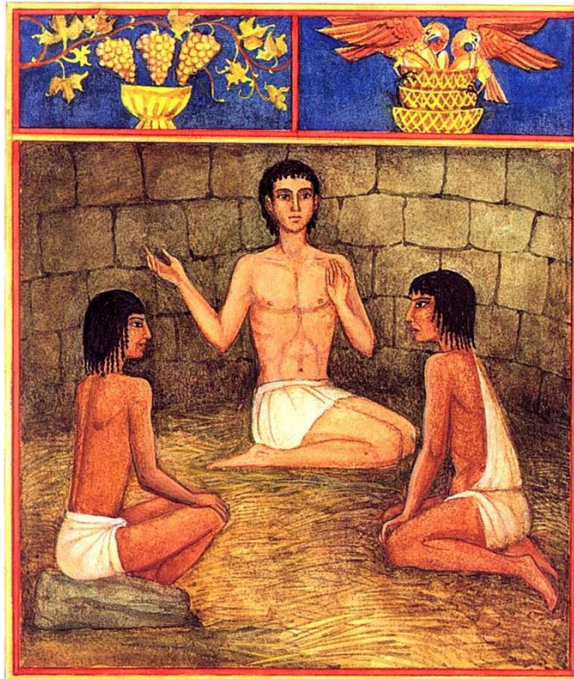
He was loved by his father but hated by his brothers and sold into slavery in Egypt at age seventeen. He made the best of this situation, however, and was soon head of the household of Potiphar, an Egyptian official. Then he was falsely accused by Potiphar’s wife and thrown into prison. He made the best of this situation too, and was placed in charge of everyone in the prison house. This is where we join our story today, as he tells Pharaoh’s butler and baker about their dreams.

Although the story is about Joseph, the side

narrative in today’s portion of it is about the fate of these two servants of Pharaoh. In the internal sense the subject has not changed.

The story is still about Joseph, or about what he stands for, the inner part of us, the part that is open to the Lord and trying to live a spiritual life.

The meaning of this story could not be more relevant to us at this time, or more important to our quest for resilience. The interesting and maybe surprising message is that what happens in the story with the butler and baker is what needs to happen with us if we wish to be resilient instead of brittle in the face of challenges.



In our lives both the butler and the baker can be suspect and problematic. The butler is the way that our senses serve us by bringing us knowledge or information. The baker is the way that our senses serve us by inspiring feelings or emotions connected with that information. Both of these are important, because everything we do involves the things we know and our feelings about them.

In the story, however, the butler and baker have sinned against the king, and are in prison. Last week’s story focused on being mindful and aware of what is going on in our spiritual lives. The butler and baker are in prison as a result of this awareness – in this case our realization that information carried by the senses can be misleading, and that the emotions connected with that information can move us in directions that are neither good nor useful

(*Arcana Coelestia* 5076). This needs to be fixed. We need to look beyond appearances to see the real truth, and we need to avoid being carried away by the emotions triggered by what we see and hear.

The dreams describe the way that we can do this. The key thing is what Joseph says to them from the start: interpretations belong to God. That is, the Lord's teachings and the Lord's presence need to govern both the information we receive and the emotions that it stirs. If we allow the Lord to govern these two things in us, we will be able to interpret life in ways that are positive and useful, and it will help us to be resilient whatever happens. The dreams describe the process.

In the butler's dream, he sees a budding vine. The vine stands for a new understanding, and the ripening grapes that he then sees stand for the truths in our mind being joined to heavenly loves. Pressing them into Pharaoh's cup means expressing this love in words and deeds. Giving the cup to Pharaoh means making these thoughts and these actions our own (*Arcana Coelestia* 5090).

The meaning of the butler's dream, therefore, is that as we regenerate a rebirth occurs in our minds. Whereas we have previously been misled or confused by much of the information we encounter, we become better able to interpret what we see and hear. The facts then serve our spiritual life instead of the opposite, and we can distinguish truth and misinformation more accurately. We become better able to adapt well in the face of adversity.

The baker's dream describes this same process in our emotional life, how order is restored to the feelings connected with what we learn. In his dream there are three baskets on his head. The three baskets are three levels of the mind. The baked goods in the top basket are the loves that flow into our minds from heaven to serve our spiritual life.

But the baskets have holes in them, so they are unable to hold, to define, or to limit this love. To have holes in them means to lack the affection for both good and truth, so the truth is missing that would receive and shape the love. Our interest in

what is right and true is in that case simply not sufficient to restrain and direct our natural desires so that they serve spiritual things (*Arcana Coelestia* 5145.6). Birds then eat the baked goods because when sensual desires are unrestrained, they are vulnerable to false ideas that originate in evil, meant by the birds. Our thinking is guided by these ideas and our emotions are in charge.

The outcome for the baker is very different than for the butler. You would think that the solution would be the same for both. The butler is restored to his place because the things that we know can be redirected and reinterpreted, new facts can be identified, our understanding can mature and grow, and these can then serve us faithfully. But for some reason our natural desires don't have that same capacity.

According to the explanation of this in the Writings (*Arcana Coelestia* 5157) the baker has to be rejected and replaced by another baker, because our physical desires do not gradually change and improve the way that our ideas do. Our subjective experience is that our desires do change, but that is not actually what is happening. Instead we let them go, and they are replaced by better ones. So the butler is returned to his position, but the baker is not. Our fallacious ideas are changed over time, and can serve in our regeneration. Not so our sensual desires.

The implications of this story in our search for resilience are enormous. When we realize that interpretations belong to God we prioritize what comes from Him and reject the things that do not.

This happens in two ways. One is that we look for information that comes from the Lord. The other is that we allow our desires and emotions to be guided by Him. The holes in the baskets are closed, so that the love that flows in from Him is received and held, and not devoured by the birds of false ideas.

Interpretations belong to God when we are careful about what we believe, and when we rely on Him as the source of our most important information. That is, when it comes to spiritual truths we need to believe what comes from the Word and to work to



understand it correctly. We are not all scholars, but we can be careful about finding sources that we trust. When it comes to natural truths there are also trustworthy sources of reliable information, and we can find them if we try.

More important than this, though, is the development of baskets that do not have holes in them. Our natural feelings and emotions cannot be in charge, but need to be closed off, defined or guided by what we know is right and good. The holes are closed when we have principles of behavior and thought that are from the Word, when we avoid hatred, revenge, selfishness, prejudice, immorality and other negative motivations.

Our baskets then hold the love that comes from heaven, and we have peace in our lives.

The alternative is a life that is not peaceful, as described in our lesson, when events seem to bring a flood of negative thoughts.

“It seems like a deluge. Caught in this deluge they are annoyed and angry, have unpeaceful thoughts and wildly evil desires.... But when a person is kept within the sphere emanating from the life they have received through regeneration from the Lord they are completely outside such a deluge. They are so to speak in a calm and sunny, cheerful and happy place, and so are far removed from annoyance, anger, unpeacefulness, evil desires, and the like.”
Arcana Coelestia 5725

When life treats us unfairly, as happened to Joseph, this may seem like an impossible mindset. Everyone deals with negative emotions in hard times and no one expects us to be free of them. But this can help us to maintain our equilibrium and to be resilient.

On a day to day basis perhaps the more common use of the lesson of the butler and baker is in how we interpret what goes on in our normal lives. Personal, community, national and worldwide events can be troubling. The politics and feelings that these events inspire can seem overwhelming.

Remembering that interpretations belong to God can help us to interpret these events in ways that are not so troubling. And firing the baker while

restoring the butler is a big part of it.

The news cycle, social media, and our natural inclinations tend to put the baker in a leadership position. Dramatic events catch our attention, excite our emotions, and send our thoughts down paths lined with fears and anxieties. It is only natural that they would do this. This is how we naturally think.

But thinking this way makes us victims of what happened to the goods in the baker’s baskets. Our ungoverned emotions attract the birds of misinformation. We gravitate to echo-chambers of those who agree with us, and the resulting polarization arouses outrage in our hearts.

Once a narrative becomes lodged in our thinking almost anything that happens can be manipulated to feed and confirm it. Nothing is as

persuasive as a story, and once we are hooked we can’t wait to know what happens next.

But the baker’s stories aren’t peaceful ones, and they don’t lead to a happy ending. The cycle of anger, criticism, fears and negativity that they inspire is divisive and demoralizing.

The Lord, however, offers us a different narrative. The Word is the greatest story of all, and in it a troubled world is led to everlasting happiness and peace. When we choose to follow that story, and to fit life’s facts and events into that narrative, we are allowing interpretations to belong to God.

Interpretations belong to God when we believe what is true from the Word and from science and are not distracted by misinformation and appearances. Restore the butler.

Interpretations belong to God when we do not allow our emotions to be triggered by dramatic events and false narratives, but instead are governed by the laws of love that the Lord teaches. Fire the baker.

This is what Joseph knew, and it was the secret to his resilience. And even though the butler forgot his promise to bring Joseph’s plight to the attention of Pharaoh, he eventually remembered. Next week we hear how Joseph became a ruler over all of Egypt.



Readings from the Word

Genesis 40

It came to pass after these things *that* the butler and the baker of the king of Egypt offended their lord, the king of Egypt. ² And Pharaoh was angry with his two officers, the chief butler and the chief baker. ³ So he put them in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, in the prison, the place where Joseph *was* confined. ⁴ And the captain of the guard charged Joseph with them, and he served them; so they were in custody for a while.

⁵ Then the butler and the baker of the king of Egypt, who *were* confined in the prison, had a dream, both of them, each man's dream in one night *and* each man's dream with its *own* interpretation. ⁶ And Joseph came in to them in the morning and looked at them, and saw that they *were* sad. ⁷ So he asked Pharaoh's officers who *were* with him in the custody of his lord's house, saying, "Why do you look so sad today?"

⁸ And they said to him, "We each have had a dream, and there is no interpreter of it."

So Joseph said to them, "Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell them to me, please."

⁹ Then the chief butler told his dream to Joseph, and said to him, "Behold, in my dream a vine was before me, ¹⁰ and in the vine were three branches; it was as though it budded, its blossoms shot forth, and its clusters brought forth ripe grapes. ¹¹ Then Pharaoh's cup was in my hand; and I took the grapes and pressed them into Pharaoh's cup, and placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand."

¹² And Joseph said to him, "This is the interpretation of it: The three branches are three days. ¹³ Now within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your place, and you will put Pharaoh's cup in his hand according to the former manner, when you were his butler. ¹⁴ But remember me when it is well with you, and please show kindness to me; make mention of me to Pharaoh, and get me out of this house. ¹⁵ For indeed I was stolen away from the land of the Hebrews; and also I have done nothing here that they should put me into the dungeon."

¹⁶ When the chief baker saw that the interpretation was good, he said to Joseph, "I also was in my dream, and there were three baskets with holes in them on my head. ¹⁷ In the uppermost basket were all kinds of baked goods for Pharaoh, and the birds ate them out of the basket on my head."

¹⁸ So Joseph answered and said, "This is the interpretation of it: The three baskets are three days. ¹⁹ Within three days Pharaoh will lift off your head from you and hang you on a tree; and the birds will eat your flesh from you."

²⁰ Now it came to pass on the third day, *which was* Pharaoh's birthday, that he made a feast for all his servants; and he lifted up the head of the chief butler and of the chief baker among his servants. ²¹ Then he restored the chief butler to his butlership again, and he placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand. ²² But he hanged the chief baker, as Joseph had interpreted to them. ²³ Yet the chief butler did not remember Joseph, but forgot him.

Arcana Coelestia 5725

When a person who has led a good life is taken back into their own selfhood, and so into the sphere that emanates from the life properly their own, it seems like a deluge. Caught in this deluge they are annoyed and angry, have unpeaceful thoughts and wildly evil desires.... But when a person is kept within the sphere emanating from the life they have received through regeneration from the Lord they are completely outside such a deluge. They are so to speak in a calm and sunny, cheerful and happy place, and so are far removed from annoyance, anger, unpeacefulness, evil desires, and the like.

