

## **Genesis 39:20-23 The purpose of his imprisonment**

### **Introduction**

It's not fair. Unfortunately in too many situations around the world this is not whinging but an accurate statement of reality. There are individual situations of misfortunate or larger-scale issues such as the tragedy of the Christian community in Iraq. At the start of the second Iraq war there were 1.4 million of them in the country, now there are only 400,000 Christians left in Iraq. Sweden, the United States and Germany, the three countries that have made these Christians welcome, has triple the number of Iraqi Christians than their homeland. A massacre at the Roman Catholic Our Lady of Salvation Church in Baghdad in October 2010 in which two priests and fifty members of the congregation were murdered with the rest saved by the intervention of Special Forces soldiers, resulted in special measures being taken by the Government there. Now Christian Churches, like many other places of worship in the city, are surrounded by concrete blast walls, coils of razor wire and armed guards [*The Times* 11 March 2013, pp.26-27]. Politicians in Britain and the USA insist the country is better off now than before that war yet hundreds die each month in terrorist attacks to this day. The delusions of these politicians are seriously disturbing. The only blessing and crumb of comfort was the wonderful news on Thursday 29 August 2013 when the voice of sanity and reason was heard and no more mad bombings would be carried out supposedly in our name when the Westminster Parliament voted against a bombing campaign in Syria. There are moments when we are forced to stop and think –what is going on in my life? Where will I turn? Joseph in the gloomy light of a prison cell must have been in that position. His life has been ruined once already in his late teens –how could he start all over again? Let's give some thought to reflecting on this part of his and our story.

### **1. Why bother?**

What's the point of doing the right thing if so many other people take the easy way out lying, cheating stealing and getting away with it? What's the point working hard for a low wage when a proportion of people living on benefits somehow can get more than the majority of workers will ever obtain in their wage packets? Why tell the truth when seeking public housing when so many others will lie about their relational status to jump the queue? Why fill in a C.V. with only the qualifications you have earned and records of experience gained when other applicants will create fictitious degrees or lesser awards or describe inflated employment histories to get their applications to the front of the line for a potential interview? The problems too are numerous on the part of employers in the way potential employees are selected, including Christian agencies. Slanted interviews choosing different questions to favour a preferred candidate; offering financial terms and conditions which they cannot deliver are but two I have heard of in the recent past. Many more examples could be highlighted in response to this heartfelt question –‘why bother?’ Why should I be any different to the majority of people around me, sadly including some Christians, who bend or break God's moral rules to ensure their preferences are attained? If you have never asked this question quite seriously from your heart, then all I can say is that you have either been extremely fortunate in life or lived a sheltered existence. If it is not our personal issue, then the vast majority of us know other people who have been treated unfairly in a whole variety of situations. ‘Why bother?’ is a very genuine question that deserves to be taken seriously and answered appropriately. The simple and straightforward answer to this question is contained in words of Paul to the Church at Corinth in II Corinthians 5:7-10: *For we live by faith, not by sight.* <sup>8</sup> *We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the*

Lord.<sup>9</sup> ***So we make it our goal to please Him***, whether we are at home in the body or away from it.<sup>10</sup> For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due to us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad. This was not a one-off statement of this principle as the apostle makes the same point in his letter to the church at Rome, in Romans 14:7-11: *For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone.*<sup>8</sup> ***If we live, we live for the Lord***; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.<sup>9</sup> For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.<sup>10</sup> You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat.<sup>11</sup> It is written: "As surely as I live," says the Lord, "Every knee will bow before me; every tongue will acknowledge God."<sup>12</sup> So then, ***each of us will give an account of ourselves to God***. There is no higher motivation than this as II Corinthians 5:9 makes plain: ***So we make it our goal to please Him...*** What is your goal in life? If this is your goal and mine then it will have a profound aspect on every area of our lives. How are you, how am I getting in with this biblical goal? Are we attempting to live that out in each area of life, at home at work in church or wherever we are? When this principle is accepted it and grasped it might be transformational for someone here who never grasped this biblical motivation for our conduct. 'My Utmost for His Highest', a phrase associated with Baptist pastor Oswald Chambers' devotional guide captures something of what God desires each one of us to seek to attain –however imperfectly.

Joseph, in a damp and dark prison cell, had every right to feel hard done by. Just because God can be at work for good in all kinds of situations (Romans 8:28), it does not mean these situations are good in themselves. Many can be the very opposite. His mind must have gone over and over again those early awful days as a slave in Egypt, fearful and extremely vulnerable. A decade of progress in working his way up the ladder in Potiphar's household seemed to be guaranteeing a secure future when, without warning his security vanished once more. It hurts most when we have done the right thing or said the right thing and suffered consequences consistent with completely the opposite choices of behaviour. Yet we believe in the providence of God as the author of Psalm 105:16-22 did –with respect to Joseph he wrote concerning the Egyptians: *He called down famine on the land and destroyed all their supplies of food;*<sup>17</sup> *and he sent a man before them –Joseph, sold as a slave.*<sup>18</sup> *They bruised his feet with shackles, his neck was put in irons,*<sup>19</sup> *till what he foretold came to pass, **till the word of the Lord proved him true.***<sup>20</sup> *The king sent and released him and the ruler of peoples set him free.*<sup>21</sup> *He made him master of his household, ruler over all he possessed,*<sup>22</sup> *to instruct his princes as he pleased and teach his elders wisdom.* God was at work, although Joseph could not see it at this time. God is at work in your life and mine although we may not see it at any particular time in our lives. In the light of this revelation Paul wrote these words to the Church at Colossae: *Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, **as working for the Lord**, not for human masters,*<sup>24</sup> *since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. **It is the Lord Christ you are serving*** (Colossians 3:23-24).

## 2. What is the purpose?

We know that life for all of us will contain times of heartache and tears. Illness and death are a given at some point. In addition, all kinds of challenges can be our lot at different stages of life, but to have a sense of its meaning and purpose is vital to give a perspective to it all. There are those conviction atheists who would hold that view today, that there is no good or evil, nor is there any purpose for living; this mindset is captured by the writer of Ecclesiastes who three thousand years ago stated a viewpoint he wished to examine and then challenge its validity: *'Meaningless! Meaningless!'* says the Teacher. *'Utterly meaningless! Everything is*

*meaningless.* The life of Joseph told at great length in the book of Genesis is in part a classic response to critique such a viewpoint. The biblical writer was inspired by God to declare here is an example of what the providential care looks like through the tough times and the good. It was a threefold test for this young man and also is a similar challenge for us today.

(a) **A Test of Godliness** The honest answer we must give on many occasions is ‘I don’t know’. Yet at the same time we also want to answer that we believe that God can bring good out of the most unpromising of situations, if we are open to see Him at work. It is important to recognise that we are in a spiritual battle. Every time God’s people want to take a big step of faith that will significantly advance His kingdom the evil one stirs up trouble using other people, sadly sometimes even other Christians, who don’t recognise their actions in that light, to frustrate and hinder the work. Ephesians 6:10-13 states: *Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.*<sup>11</sup> *Put on the full armour of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes.*<sup>12</sup> *For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.*<sup>13</sup> *Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.* What is the resource we use in this battle to overcome the evil one? In Ephesians 6:18-19 Paul writes: *And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people.*<sup>19</sup> *Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel...* This is why we have increased our church prayer meetings and established a separate deacons’ prayer meeting to win through in His name. However, Jesus never promised an easy road for His faithful followers to tread. In the Beatitudes, in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus said: *Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*<sup>11</sup> *Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.*<sup>12</sup> *Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.* (Matthew 5:40) At the Last Supper He reminded His closest disciples that there would be spiritual tests of their walk with God as they sought to carry on the work entrusted to them by Jesus. John 15:20-23 states: *Remember what I told you: “A servant is not greater than his master.” If they persecuted Me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed My teaching, they will obey yours also.*<sup>21</sup> *They will treat you this way because of My name, for they do not know the one who sent Me.*<sup>22</sup> *If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not be guilty of sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin.*<sup>23</sup> *Whoever hates Me hates My Father as well.*

It is a test of personal godliness not to respond in kind; not to send rude or hurtful communications to people who do that to us; not to do things because others have first carried out inappropriate actions against us. Followers of Jesus will want to be people of peace and reconciliation, because we wish to reflect the character of a reconciling God, as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ.

(b) **A Test of Character** (I Peter 1:6-7) *In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.*<sup>7</sup> *These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.* Our outward persona may be bright and cheerful, but inside we might be full of heartache and pain, but it is hidden away from other people. Or another person may look austere and serious in public but in private is a calm and peaceful and happy individual. Like the proverbial iceberg we see in the water only a small part of the whole is visible to the human eye. Peter with confidence makes the assumption that his readers will have gone through trials. The question is how do we come through them? What kind of person are we that emerges the other side? In times of testing a child of God humbly seeks to honour the Lord and respond to the trial with a

gracious response with a conscious sense of dependence on Christ, despite all the trials they are enduring. Yet God only allows His faithful servants to pass through these times so that we can handle blessings and greater fruitfulness in His service in coming days. Endurance in standing firm for godly principles and with a passion to make Christ known to more people cannot be watered down, but we trust in time to win through as we in the footsteps of our Saviour who forgave the religious leaders of His day for their persecution of Him said: *Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing* (Luke 23:34). We must be clear here these people would have angrily retorted that they were rightly angry because Jesus wanted to take them in a new direction they believed was contrary to God's way. What Jesus meant by His words was that they did not grasp that though sincere in their words and actions, they were actually opposing the new work and revelation of God to His people in that place at that time in history. Jesus wished to close that chapter of ministry with grace and forgiveness and reconciliation. His followers who reflect however faintly His likeness will desire to do the same;

(c) **A Test of Confidence** (II Corinthians 12:9-10) <sup>9</sup> *But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.* <sup>10</sup> *That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.* Isobel Kuhn, in the well-known missionary book, *Green Leaf in Drought*, tells the story of Arthur Mathews and his young family, who were missionaries with China Inland Mission in the 1950s. In 1951, China Inland Mission called for an evacuation of all its missionaries in China due to the oppression of the communist leaders there. Two years later, Arthur Mathews finally made it out to Hong Kong, after enduring torture and starvation. Yet their faith remained strong. What gave the Mathews such strong faith? What enabled him and his wife to endure what they went through? Isobel Kuhn tells a compelling account, based on Mathews' own letters, about the Source of his strength: God and God alone. God continually showed Himself faithful to Arthur and Wilda Mathews. Though Arthur and Wilda were unable to do the work they felt called to do, God showed that through their hardships He was more than enough for his children. The enduring faith of the Mathews family was a legacy of incalculable worth to the native Chinese church. As Kuhn asks, "What more potent message could God have given these people? No wonder He deliberately sealed the lips of His servants, confined their hands and their feet, and then poured His life through them that the Chinese church might see and might desire....Was God wrong to do this? In the farthest, most inland part of that great land was God unfair to ask two corns of wheat to die in this world's comforts that others might see for two long years (not just two days: God gave them a good stretch of testing time) how *He is sufficient for all these things*? He sent them to serve by life and so sealed their lips. It was a much more potent message." [ [www.christianbook.com/green-leaf-in-drought/Isobel-Kuhn](http://www.christianbook.com/green-leaf-in-drought/Isobel-Kuhn) ] For some time they stoically endured their trials, but later came to rejoice in them and sang hymns together to encourage one another until the day of their release; They viewed their sufferings as being for the sake of Christ. Two years of outstanding sermons or outstanding ministry work would have been of less assistance to the Chinese Christians about to go through the fires of Maoist persecution. Like Daniel's three friends (Daniel 3), they had modelled how to go through the furnace –an example that could not have been given any other way. In it all God's grace was sufficient for them, and will be so for us as well.

### 3. **What is the most important?**

Stony Brook School, Long Island, New York, USA, was founded in 1922 with the motto "**Character Before Career.**" In a secular brochure of private boarding schools it makes the following statement about its primary purpose: The Stony Brook School educates students in matters of the mind, body, and heart. Students are trained to be leaders with integrity and virtue. We find that character is essential to the development of the whole person and maintain a spiritual component to the education process. While students are presented with the truths of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, they are free to maintain their own personal spiritual beliefs [www.boardingschoolreview.com/school\_ov/school\_id/133]. The founders of this

institution got it absolutely right. How sad that these convictions are not a given any longer in our land. The old hymn ‘Yield not to temptation, for yielding is sin, each victory will help you some other to win’ (BHB569) is right on the mark here in addressing this important subject. Joseph had no choice over his circumstances whether as a child or young adult; whether as a slave or later a Prime Minister. These outward circumstances were vastly different to one another. However, he could determine his convictions and hold fast to his principles through the good times or the bad. His character could not be controlled by other people. Would he stand firm? Jeremiah was put in prison for preaching the truth that God was angry with Judah for turning away from His laws and if no repentance was forthcoming then the city would be destroyed by the Babylonians and the survivors exiled never to see their homeland again. One day the King called for Jeremiah requesting a message from God. If the prophet changed his mind no doubt he would have been released from the opposition he had been experiencing. Jeremiah 37:16-17 states: *Jeremiah was put into a vaulted cell in a dungeon, where he remained a long time.* <sup>17</sup> *Then King Zedekiah sent for him and had him brought to the palace, where he asked him privately, ‘Is there any word from the Lord?’ ‘Yes,’ Jeremiah replied, ‘you will be delivered into the hands of the king of Babylon.’* Jeremiah as God’s servant chose despite the continuation of his ordeal to be faithful to the Word God had given him. He could not dishonour God by giving in to the pressure put upon him to change his views on this matter. He saw that honouring God by remaining true to the revelation he had been given was a recognition of what was most important. At times speaking God’s Word and following His calling and direction is not popular, but the servants of the Lord must persevere through the times of trial, because we know that honouring Him is of ultimate importance.

#### 4. What difference can it make?

<sup>20</sup> *Joseph’s master took him and put him in prison, the place where the king’s prisoners were confined. But while Joseph was there in the prison,* <sup>21</sup> **the Lord was with him;** *He showed him kindness and granted him favour in the eyes of the prison warder.* <sup>22</sup> *So the warder put Joseph in charge of all those held in the prison, and he was made responsible for all that was done there.* <sup>23</sup> *The warder paid no attention to anything under Joseph’s care, because the Lord was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did.* (Genesis 39:20-23). Joseph had got it right and God would honour His servant. It was because he could withstand the heat in the trials as a slave. He could withstand the furnace of temptations as Vizier of Egypt, the man under Pharaoh who held the powers of life and death over virtually every subject citizen in the land. Standing firm under fire is your calling and mine. As we come through the trials it will strengthen and prepare us for future service and blessings. Paul got this truth so incredibly clearly. In the letter to the Philippians he explains its significance in his context, in prison for his faith in Rome facing possible execution by Emperor Nero. Listen to his extraordinary words: *Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel.* <sup>13</sup> *As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ.* <sup>14</sup> **And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.** <sup>15</sup> *It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill.* <sup>16</sup> *The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defence of the gospel.* <sup>17</sup> *The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains.* <sup>18</sup> *But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice...* (Philippians 1:12-18). Later in the same letter he adds these words: *I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it.* <sup>11</sup> *I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.* <sup>12</sup> *I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned*

*the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.* <sup>13</sup> ***I can do all this through Him who gives me strength.*** To his first readers and to us he recognized the purpose of his imprisonment and commended that we too trust God fully with our future as he had done. May God grant us the strength we need to stand firm for Him in our generation too, for Jesus' sake, Amen.