

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_expositor-series-1.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php)

## JOSEPH: AN ETHICAL AND BIBLICAL STUDY.

## V.

## "THE LIFE WITHIN BARS."

(GEN. XXXIX. 20 TO END, AND XL. 1 TO END.)

WE know that there is a fine and sympathetic connection between what befell Joseph in actual fact and what is written about him in Scripture; for we have seen that his doing of God's will was so recognised and sanctioned that the record of it has become a Word of God to man. Yet the connection is more intricate and subtle than that; and here we seem to see something of the process by which Bible Truth that now teaches had in the first instance to be taught. It was first given, and at the same time verified, in human experience. By means of circumstance and incident, through which He led the life of Joseph, God was making upon his human heart and memory great *impressions*, to which afterwards in His Book He gave permanent *expression*; He transferred the record and lessons as graven on Joseph's soul and fixed in his character in such a way that his consciousness of God became legible and instructive to others. The facts of his life became truths, and were charged with a Divine emphasis which made them *doctrine*; they were commissioned with a Divine power to *teach*.

This fact can be used as a key, and it may enable us to unlock the problem of all Revelation—even that given in the Life of the Man who was God. God has always to handle human lives, and thus to try and prove them. He has to take soft and tender human hearts and leave the trace of His touch upon them; He has, as if in furnaces, to make character soluble, in order to fashion it more divinely. He did all this in some chosen lives, in a conspicuous and transcendent degree, in the days of old; and

that was His first step towards this Book, which reveals and explains our own life to us. He lined and cut the letters first on tablets, which burned and bled in the process, and these became the type with which The Divine printed His Book. The pages are orderly before all men now, and the tale reads correct and complete, and all ends well in light and love; but look at the lives from which this record has been transferred. Think of Joseph's life; think of the life of Jesus. The print may be distinct and smooth and fair to read, but turn to the type that the printer has used. Everything there is reversed and blurred; it is all black and harsh, and like scars that once were wounds. Even now nothing there is of itself legible to us, and to some one everything there must once have been not only an enigma, but a pain.

The arrest laid upon ourselves when we read of this elect and lofty soul being so lied on and wronged is very profound. Great voices are heard in our own being, and spiritual reserves seem to muster with swift tread far within us, as if aware that great issues were at stake. We feel at once as if our own life were somehow involved, and our highest inheritance in the universe questioned and challenged. So we stand still to watch as they lead this prisoner forth from Potiphar's house. He is a notable prisoner, for virtue is his only crime and its punishment—worse than death—is dishonour; and we are tempted to ask if even this once, in a corner of God's wide kingdom, His hand was shortened or His law of justice was suspended.

That question would be rash and inadequate. There is no accident or chance in what thus befell. The scale and range of these events must be measured by standards which assume finer powers, and are the index of higher laws, than those of common calculation. The tests of eternity were being applied in a preliminary way to this

unreproved and beauteous youth, so as to suggest the divinity in suffering and the sacrificial element in every life that saves. The mystery is not in any high law suspended, but in highest law suggested, as they walk this blameless lad along the public street in the form of a sinful man. It is his higher purpose and power in life that have clashed and struck with lives of meaner order, and have brought it into this temporary confusion. So it is a stately procession as Joseph goes to that Egyptian prison house, there either to live or die—it matters not which! We may infer the supremacy and sovereignty of goodness in him even from the way in which the tempter planned his fell assault, when, after a long fast of his affections apart from the charities of home life, and without the solace of his father's love, his heart was an-hungered; and still more from the way in which he had drawn his line of defence where his nature was most vulnerable, and made his stand where in that rude age it was counted little harm to yield. We may see it all in his mien; he has walked in fire, and the flame has not kindled on him; he shrinks from no man's notice, though they have attached a repugnant sin to his name; his eyes retain their steady focus. He wears honour on his high brow, though the victim at once of human hate and lust; and he has noble distinction as of sacrifice. Any sadness in his face is after the likeness of the Divine—a serene, silent sorrow; a wistful grief more pathetic than tears; the deep, dumb pain of innocence suffering for sin. We may be sure that he is consecrate and committed to some divine service when he suffers so; and he must be splendidly attended, for when men go forth as the world's saviours their invisible retinue are the unconquerable human powers and the allies of heaven. Still, it is to common eyes a strange, sad spectacle. This shining Hebrew face, conspicuously bright among those of the swarthy Egyptians, as long before

Sarai's had been and as long afterwards Moses' was, dashed as if with disastrous eclipse! and that white, clean soul made the arena of such insult and pain! We dare say that the red drops of a sore soul-sweat were on Joseph's brow as, indicted in one flash of thwarted passion, condemned ere he could plead, and convicted before he was tried, he now went doomed, and like one disgraced, to that house of bondage; and these drops of heart-shed travail might well be struck on lintel and doorpost as he passed within—a token for God to mark, until in liberty and glory this son was manifested. Only one soul was then under God's altar to call; but for Joseph, while his life was within these prison bars, the voice of Abel must have been heard crying aloud, "How long? O Lord, holy and true!"

The laws of human nature and life were fixed when God made man in His own image, and they have not changed since; so there is no cause for wonder when highest human lives are found at many points to resemble each other and seem even to follow one another along the same paths. We may rather expect to find one great life seeming to flash its light and give sign to many others, when we watch history; and, as we trace it in detail, we need not be surprised when early we find that other feet had indicated those steps which in the fulness of the times received approval and warrant as God's way of life. Yet we must not detach the Bible's high lives from ordinary surroundings or divert them from the common roads of human feet. These lives were not sustained on spirit-wings, so as to make their course to most of us inaccessible and visionary. They lead to the keeping of sheep, and the ploughing of fields, and the carpenter's shop, and to household service by door and stair. So we must not blind our eyes with the aureole around the head of this priest of an early sacrifice, but we must look at the plain facts of his hands that work and his feet that walk. Neither romance nor glory there! Joseph had made clean,

fair writing in his little book of life while he had a borrowed home with Potiphar; but the Great Teacher came and turned the leaf, and bade him begin anew and write another chapter with a sharper pen. And what a school in which to serve and learn, and every day write his page! An uncomfortable school! a house of correction indeed! and yet the pupil neither a criminal nor a rebel! Dank walls and sullen windows! a bustle at the doors that at any hour might be the rustle of Death to some one! a dim, discordant place! a vault in the house of life!

“Joseph’s master took him and put him into the prison, a place where the king’s prisoners were bound”: so reads the chapter at the twentieth verse. Give any man, who knows prisoners and their history, his choice, and he would not choose a cell where a king keeps his prisoners! The dreariest walls that ever were closed around human life are those which jealous kings have built. “The head that wears a crown” lies uneasy; and kings have wakened from their sleep afraid that their dungeons were neither deep enough nor dumb enough, and often in the night have re-adjusted there both fetters and destiny. Where Pharaoh bound his prisoners, the chain of each cell would be short and tight, and Death would haunt the corridor. If we had wanted to find for Joseph the unlikeliest place in all Egypt for promotion, we should have chosen “the place where the king’s prisoners were bound.” If anywhere we might lose hope of him ever again making headway or finding outlet, it is there in those dungeons beneath the palace, even though he may carry in his heart a courage and a peace which a king cannot buy in the market, though he offer the dowry of empires. Shall we say, then, in despair, Alas! for Joseph?

Thus far, in this representative life of long ago, morality and virtue do not seem to pay. That life within bars seems an unaccountable return for duty-doing, coming, too, as it

does, after the dry pit, the journey with the slave gang, the open market, and the house of bondservice. It did seem hard that he, like a sailor who had been in the sea, had no sooner climbed up to a shelf of rock than a long green wave reaches up and lifts him down. It is altogether so glaring a case for surprise that we may sit down and think it all over. For it is better to know the terms and count the cost of virtue before we commit ourselves to it. Its wages are not paid weekly, any more than are sins. The virtuous man has often to lie a long time out of his reward. God takes long credit of those who transact with Him. The saint needs to add to his virtue patience, because his God often carries large arrears forward, even into eternity. Yet, after all, might Pharaoh's prison not be, perhaps, as much in the line of progress as Potiphar's house? He could get no higher and could grow no greater there; and that cruel push which dislodged him from that highest and threw him down into a deeper depth may necessitate the taking of steeper rock steps to freer heights. There were surely better things in Egypt for such an one as Joseph than the stewardship of Potiphar's house! Still it seems all very sad and strange. Only we cannot guess the architect's plan when we merely see the chiselling and hear the harsh grinding as they polish and prepare the stone; we cannot infer the glowing design of the artist until the cathedral window holds to the light the glass he has stained.

A little pathetic clause, over which the inspiring genius of the story seems to linger for a pensive moment, closes a verse with the simple words, "and he was there in the prison." There is a lift and a fall in the words, as if a sigh were in them. From somewhere, Pity evidently had come and hung about the prison doors while Joseph was within; and we feel as if in these words it was suggested that Pity's hands had touched the handles of the locks many

a night in vain. A *Divine* Pity it was, too, that yet had to acquiesce rather than interfere—an angel Pity, who may still attend and inspire when we ourselves must wait while some necessity of pain holds those we love. The sympathy of these words yields to our love and patience still further, and we seem to catch from them a reflex suggestion of a modest, reticent resignation in the heart of Joseph. Amidst such unkindness, and through the torture of such continual twisting and reversing in his honest life, he could not have kept a shining face and a fresh, untarnished soul; he must have grown sullen and sour, or morbid and callous, if he had not been conscious that there was pity for him wherever the Divine dwelt, and if he had not been aware of a continual ministering like that of visitants from God. The whole harsh story grows tender and mystic under the simple spell of these plain words, and there are gleams—almost a glow is seen—in the darkness. Joseph must have had “food convenient” brought to him in his cell, as if on wings and from far away; and a glory must often have fallen on the bars as they whose faces see God went and came. Foolish work is being attempted in that Egyptian jail!—two impossibilities: to baffle God, and to imprison a human soul.

There was, however, another quarter hard by where no pity was, and whence no ministry of kindness came. Other than angel hands were about the prison locks, only to make sure that they were fast enough. There are two worlds unseen on either hand of every human life, and they are antagonistic to one another; yet we are in alliance with the one or the other every moment, and we are visited by the winged spirits of each continually. Joseph’s foiled temptress had not a jot of pity to extend to him nor a finger of help; she, with sin’s madness in her heart, was sworn against him. She not only lied on him and left him, but she hated him every day the more, and she would tell

her lie again each time she feared his cell door was loose. Her darkest thoughts would often prowl down the stone stair of the king's dungeons. Tenderest of ministers, woman can become the keenest of persecutors! There is no magnanimity in sin or chivalry among the sinful. Sin is not safe, if we look at it merely economically and selfishly. There is no affiance between souls when sin is the bond, and none of its alliances can be trusted; it can neither create friendship nor sustain fellowship. It is a cold, disintegrating power amongst men; it cuts us off from true relations to others, and even from happy relations to our own nature. It is the serpent power in life's garden. Thorns and thistles grow in its trail; it drives out the *man*. It destroys the fibres out of which purity and beauty and truth grow, and it turns round its cold head to eat the human soul.

"But the Lord was with Joseph, and showed him mercy, and gave him favour . . . and that which he did the Lord made it to prosper." There are forces at work in Joseph's life which are of such deep and essential motive that, in any circumstances, it will be true "That which hath been is that which shall be." His life is geared to, and is in touch with, the divine order of things. He cannot but succeed, apparently; and his life will not wreck or drift with circumstances. Dash it here or there, turn it upside down or any way! it will right itself; and, though the waters around it be only a litter of broken hopes, the life will steady itself and progress. He was soon to the front in the prison, the one man there so central and supreme that nobody but he counted, and "whatsoever they did there, he was the doer of it." He must have stooped to conquer. It must have been obedience with a cheerful unreserve, an entire willingness to submit, an immediate and uncomplaining faithfulness in duty, that won the honours of that dismal little world of kolt and

bar. Prompt, reliable, and persistent, never moody or morbid for a moment, this swift, mercurial life begins soon to affect the whole feeling of the place. Himself never once resentful or vindictive, he seems to soothe and reconcile; himself never sulking, he diffuses sunshine; his own life melodiously toned, he seems to subdue the dissonance of the harsh house of pain, and he reigns there in the power of higher and better worlds. It certainly was not brilliant talent that won this success. The wards of a king's jail are just the one place in all the world where genius is of no avail—is indeed a disadvantage; for there the cleverer the prisoner the stricter the watch, and the greater his influence over others the more restricted his liberty! Everything in a prison is devised and elaborated so as to counterwork and thwart the strength and ingenuity of the man with brains. The explanation, therefore, of Joseph's distinction in that impossible environment must be given in the coming in of higher laws, which found channel and play for themselves in his sweet, pure soul.

This spiritually interpretative narrative gently glows at this point, when it makes this thought the *motif* of the situation, "The Lord was with him." If we translate the words out of their Hebrew meaning, so as to read them into universal experience, we may understand that there was a connection close and sympathetic between that isolated life and the power of other worlds. He has been reviled, but he reviles not again, and while suffering wrongfully he neither strives nor cries; yet the pressure of God's hand is upon his soul, and a fine strength continually reinforces him. Each hour that the grating lock renewed his imprisonment he was made aware that he was "alone and yet not alone"; for the pure in heart there saw God. No outward omen of the supernatural was given; no voice coming from the cloud that overshadowed him proclaimed him a son, nor did any light so shine on his face that it

needed to be veiled when warders opened to him in the gloom; yet to those of even dull vision his open countenance became an index of a soul within that had no controversy with God, and a constant composure and quietness gave plain token that a Divine Presence was comforting him. Is the teaching here not more intricate and subtle than if it told us of gates having opened of their own accord? And are not the lessons of universal reference, as we are told of the victory of a silent and patient faith? For may we not rise out of any straits in life, as Joseph rose out of his? and, in a conscience void of offence, is not God's companionship available to us in any solitude? and, in the approvings of an innocent heart, may we not all know that He is well pleased with us? Yet we are upon the lines of a diviner life than our own when we find ourselves here with one who seemed to draw in God with his constant breath, and to whom the Divine will was no effort. For is there not a subtler suggestion than of a merely human life given in the whole picture in this passage? and, at the heart of all that is here said, is there not a throb as if the speaker had a deeper thought than only of Joseph? Is there not an intricate interweaving of prophecy and history here? and does not a mild ecstasy come over our own soul when we realize that the Divine credentials of this long-suffering and heroic life were given when, in the unjust and cruel prison, a meek and quiet spirit descended from heaven like a dove and abode upon him? Yet who at all adequately believed this report from Joseph's call? and to whom in all this was the arm of the Lord revealed—until Jesus Christ came? Oh! say not that Joseph is a *type* of Jesus! That saying would only touch the letter of revelation; and the whole thing is deeper and intenser than that of a book and its words. Some law of suffering and substitution and sacrifice and atonement, far more intense and real than words can say,

runs through all the universe of God, and it comes out in flashes and agonies, and a death that has a higher life in it whenever and wherever the human and the Divine are to be reconciled and intermingle.

But come back to the story. Let it bring us back to the life within the bars. The order of a king's prison in olden days was very summary. Men were brought in and men were taken away—no one knew why; and least of all, sometimes, knew the capricious king himself. While Joseph was in charge it happened so; two prisoners were sent from the palace, the chief butler and the chief baker. As the sequel shows, they had done equally much or equally little to offend Pharaoh; they were put in ward and had to await their chance. Chance, indeed, it seems to have been, for the one was restored and the other died. Perhaps no more serious wrong had been done by either than suggested itself to the humour of a king with a pampered appetite. Our interest in their life in prison turns upon their two dreams and upon their seeing there the face of Joseph; and that we may see his face as it was seen by them, we need only to read (xl. 7) the words, "Wherefore look ye so sadly to-day?" Therein we see his face looking out of the darkness like a Rembrandt portrait. His faithfulness as a keeper was relieved by tenderness of word and tone; he looked upon his prisoners' countenances and he read their sorrows, and he spoke kindly to them. What a delightful way to begin a day even in a prison! What virtue there was in a kind look and a kind word in that gloomy house! What a good substitute for the sunshine that was shut out, and what a relief to those forbidding walls! It is the first words in the morning spoken both to God and man that determine the way in which our day shall go. A kind look can sweeten the morning, and one harsh word at the breakfast table can disorganize and disorder the life of the home circle for the whole day. One of the angels we spoke

of must have dropped in his heart the seed of that fine pity which now blossomed out in these fragrant words on this jailer's lips, "Wherefore look ye so sadly to-day?"

These men "dreamed a dream, both of them, each man his dream in one night." Dreams, dreams indeed, men have; and they know their dreams to be only dreams; the mystical shapings of a day of idle facts and fancies and miserable thinkings; a day's wreckage drifting away, they know not whither; the past and the present, the future and the impossible, the living and the dead thronging and ranging the fields of sleep. We may sometimes wisely pause and notice how we dream, for hereafter our whole life will seem but as a dream when one has awakened. Sometimes a man seems to see his own face in his dream; oftener the soul can see something of itself and its future when it dreams. As long as a man can dream, he can and he ought to pray.

It is not difficult to imagine how the two dreams in that Egyptian prison took shape. Sleep draws the curtain upon which the past and the future are thrown and tremble in a strange fantasy. The past life of each dreamer—he with his cup of wine, and he with his basket of bakemeats—inwove itself with his hope or his fear of the future. Both of them, perhaps, had been wondering what their fate might be, knowing that Pharaoh's birthday drew near when he played with life and death in his revelry; they had probably spoken of it together ere they slept. Then some half-remembered look or word of his might dimly swim into their memory or might stir in the subconsciousness of their soul a word or look which had indicated tenderness or enmity in the king's heart to the one or to the other; and thus, with these disorganized materials littered in their mind, they went to sleep. Then it was that God gave them dreams, each his own, in the one night. Between their past and their future, out of their fear and their hopes, in the dark there

they saw glimmering the things that were to be. Thus they dreamed ; but they had no interpreter and they were sad.

The want of an interpreter always makes men sad. We do not like a man to shake his head at us and speak in an unknown tongue ; nor do we like to see the curtains of our room moving and not know who stirs behind them. Nor less were these men troubled by their dreams. They felt that there was a meaning behind the two corresponding visions that the same night had brought, and they were ill at ease till Joseph deciphered what they had seen in their sleep. He knew God's writing, and read the dreams as reverently as verses in God's Book ; and as he had read, so it happened. The one was restored and the other died, as Joseph had interpreted.

We can speak only most vaguely and uncertainly about those dream visions which God gave men in the ages nearer the beginning. We have lost the spiritual sensorium to which they appealed ; perhaps they were only the rudimentary twitchings and the half-awakened consciousness of what are now full-grown spiritual faculties in the human soul. At any rate, the world was young then, and had to be educated. The veil was finer long ago than now, which separated the natural from the supernatural, the human from the divine ; and God was teaching men like children—by signs and picture letters, when, in dreams of the night and by angel visits, He kept the light of other worlds playing around our one while men slept. All that was needed lest men should have forgotten God altogether ; it was all needed till Christ should come. Then, in Him, revelation culminated, and the Book was closed. Dreams and visions from God are not now used for revealing His way or His will ; angel voices and angel visits are things of the past ; spiritual manhood has come to us in Christ Jesus, and the screen scenery of the night has been folded up and laid aside as a childish thing ; and how solemn to think

that God will never, except by Christ's silent Spirit, speak another word or give another sign to man until the trumpet sounds and time is no more!

This prison scene is so strangely suggestive that it reads altogether like a little allegory of human life on the earth. The dim light of the place, its gentle keeper, the vast uncertainty over all, and these men dreaming their dreams of the future out beyond the stone walls and iron bars of their environment—are these facts not like bare under-boughs in this book of life over which from its central stem larger branches are stretched forth? From the beginning men have felt that out beyond where they can reach and see, their destiny lay; a king was there who kept the times and the seasons, and against them or for them a hand seemed ever to be writing in the dark. Like these poor men in Pharaoh's jail, we all have wakened up here, and we are troubled with a dream. If this world were all, we should not so much mind; but our dream has been of a world beyond and of a hereafter, and it needs an interpreter. Even the world of nature is not its own interpreter; it is rather a veil hung up between us and a holy of holies, and we cannot decipher its symbolic broidery; for the blue curtain overhead, and the green along the hills, the sackcloth across the firmament, and the silent snow on the earth, do not tell men their deepest meanings. Nor is human life its own interpreter; the gates of birth and death are curtained; before birth and beyond death one figure is mysteriously outlined, but no face is seen; the moving of a form is there, but he is "covered with a mantle," and men fear to die because they do not know what they shall see when death draws up the veil. Therefore in human life it has been with men as when they dreamed. When they tried to close their eyes to it all, then the past and the future, the seen and the unseen, the fear and the hope, worked together into one strange glimmering hieroglyphic on their soul; they

awoke, and, behold, it was a dream ; yet they were sad, because they had no interpreter.

What Joseph was in the Egyptian prison, Christ Jesus has been in our world. He has resolved the mysteries of life, and interpreted the dreams of the human soul. He has laid His hand on all the past, and read to us all the future. He has told the secret of the soul, and He has the keys of Death and Hades. Our life here is a life within bars—a life in the dark—a life of which all the truth lies in shimmering dreams of the things that are to be. Life is the dream ; death will be the awakening. Have we had but one fear for an unhappy past, or but one hope for the far future ? have we come upon but one gulf in our own soul, or one vista drawing our eye towards the far away ? have the countless stars but once arrested us, or the spring flowers but once spoken to us ? has the flaming minister of the cloud but once startled us, or Death walked silent over the snow and his knock alarmed the immortality within us ? have we in any way been made aware of God interfering with our life ? Then we have seen God behind the veil ; we have dreamed a dream in our prison house ; we need an interpreter ; we need Christ to tell us what we are and what we must do. Life is a problem whether we look around or within ; we need Jesus as much to interpret our own soul to itself as to read to us the riddle of the world. It is a right hard stern world, where there is a dim light, and the clank of chains, and the grind of inexorable locks. But this prison house has a kindly Keeper. He learned sympathy when He was an innocent prisoner Himself ; He has the light of love in His eyes, and is always saying to us, “ Why look ye so sadly to-day ? ” We should take Him and His words as *the Truth* when He speaks of life and death, of the present and the hereafter ; and we should arrange and prepare as He has said. For ere long we must hear along these corridors of life the iron footfall of a

stranger, who never came before, and who comes only once. He is the King's last messenger; he is himself a king—men call him the king of terrors—and his name is Death.

Our life needs more than an Interpreter; it needs a Saviour. We need some one with us in life. We are neither wise enough, nor strong enough, nor good enough as we are and alone. We do not know the kind of guests that harbour in our hearts, and how false they will play us if we trust to ourselves. We do not know how sudden may be the rush of armoured men out of ambush to bind us, if we have not at our call One mightier than they. What wrecks of life we all have seen! What a sight one shore of eternity will present—strewn with the wreckage of men's lives, ill-steered and then not steered at all, lives that foundered at sea! We do not know what we are doing nor what we are coming to, trifling with our life in this world, bowling its millions of miles through space, and these million worlds of star-lit distance all looking down on us. Have we not all been surprised and appalled by what we have come suddenly upon in our own heart and life?

Thou ship of Life, with Death and Birth and Life and Sex aboard,  
And fires of desires burning hotly in the hold,  
I fear thee, O! I fear thee, for I hear the tongue and sword  
At battle on the deck; and the wild mutineers are bold.  
The dewdrop morn may fall from off the petal of the sky,  
But all the deck is wet with blood and stains the crystal red;  
A pilot, God, a pilot! for the helm is left awry,  
And the best sailors in the ship lie there among the dead.

Our life needs saving. It is worth saving. The whole world is not so precious as our own soul; our soul is immortal. There is a Saviour—only one! God says so—and He is mighty to save. We know He can save us; we believe this, we feel it. And all the bells of heaven are rung whenever one sinner on earth accepts His great salvation.

ARMSTRONG BLACK.