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Prison - Vision - Provision

by T. Austin-Sparks

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"And Joseph's master took him, and put him into the prison, the place where the king's prisoners were bound: and he was there in the prison" (Genesis 39:20).

"Then Pharaoh sent and called Joseph, and they brought him hastily out of the dungeon... and Pharaoh said unto Joseph, I have dreamed a dream... I have heard say of thee, that when thou hearest a dream thou canst interpret it. And Joseph answered Pharaoh, saying, It is not in me: God shall give Pharaoh an answer."

"And Pharaoh said unto his servants, Can we find such a one as this, a man in whom the spirit of God is?"

"And he [Joseph] gathered up all the food of the seven years... and Joseph laid up corn as the sand of the sea, very much..."

"And the famine was sore in the land" (Genesis 41:14-16,38,48,49,56).

"...desiring to gain favour with the Jews, Felix left Paul in bonds" (Acts 24:27).

"And when we entered into Rome, the centurion delivered the prisoners to the captain of the praetorian guard" (Acts 28:16, margin)

"The prisoner of Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 4:1).

*"I John... was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God and the testimony of Jesus".
"And I heard... a great voice... saying, What thou seest, write in a book, and send it to the churches"
(Revelation 1:9-11).*

The passages quoted above are a summary of the lives and ministries of three of God's servants, the fruit of whose experience has meant life to the people of God in a very full way. But that way of God's sovereign choice is not peculiar to those three alone. It is the story of many more, both in Bible times and since. To the former we could add Jeremiah and Daniel, as outstanding cases.

There are many such records in the 'Book of Remembrance' of those whose hard way has meant - and is now meaning - bread for the spiritually hungry. The prison has not always been *literal* chains and incarceration. Sometimes it has been a sick room; sometimes the lonely isolation of a divinely-appointed place of service; sometimes the rejection and exclusion of a servant of God because of prejudice, blindness, jealousy, or spiritual smallness on the part of those who could so force him out. Of many it could - and can - be said: "for the word of God and the testimony of Jesus".

There are some features of such 'imprisonments' which it may be helpful to note. Inclusively, of course, we have to have our hearts at rest as to the certainty of the Divine government. Provided always that such a position is not due to a wayward, self-willed, or disobedient course on the part of the one concerned, and their situation is not due to anything akin to that of Jonah's predicament; although there may have been human weakness and mistakes, yet God is greater than all, and given a heart really true to Him, He can turn all things to serve His main end: "Who worketh *all things* after the counsel of his own will".

In difficult and seemingly impossible situations there will always be much room for reflection upon the faults and mistakes which *could* account for the trouble. 'If only' is a desolating reflection. 'If only Paul had not appealed to Caesar!' 'If only Joseph had told Potiphar what his wife had really done!' There is no end to this kind of reflection, and there are very few who, if they had their time over again, would not - they think - have done differently, and so have avoided a great deal of trouble. We are not referring to particular sins, but to 'mistakes'. The matter of the sins of the past goes without saying that we should - with our present light - not repeat. With so much of what we *now* look upon as mistaken, we *then* acted according to the best light that we had. This provides a very large realm for sovereign grace, and sovereign grace is quite equal to the task.

The adversary of God and of our walk with Him will flog us hard with accusation to make us mistrust Him. There is thus a big realm which has to be definitely committed to the Father's understanding and mercy.

Having said that, we can look at some of these more comforting features of adversity.

1. God is never overtaken by an emergency, nor is He the victim of adverse activities. This fact is so evident in the above instances.

Joseph's classic verdict upon the whole soul-wracking experience was 'You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good', and then he gives the all-justifying reason - "God *meant it*". Paul and John would have heartily endorsed that verdict.

The very foreknowledge of God in choosing and calling His servants, whose hearts He cleanses from selfish and worldly ambitions, is involved in what befalls them in the way of their devotion to Him. Even Job, than whom no one ever had a more bewildering history, could say: "He knoweth the way that I take".

Not even in the greatest and most terrible of man's defaultings, and Satan's seeming triumph - the "Fall" - was God unprepared and unprovided with His way through. The answer was with Him before the demand was actually existing - "The Lamb [was] ...slain from the foundation [the laying down] of the world". God's end justified His permission. Grace and glory will vastly transcend the suffering and the sorrow. With God there are no unforeseen accidents. "He is Lord of *all*".

2. While the servant in question is going through the dark, cold, and desolate ordeal of the 'prison', he does not know what it all means. At *best* and *most* he knows that the Lord is God. All the appearances are of being cut off, shut up or in; being forgotten; having suffered through the treachery, disloyalty, cruelty, or fickleness of men - even of brethren; or the vicious spite of evil powers, human and satanic. The iron can eat into the soul, as it did with Joseph. The battle against bitterness of spirit, disappointment, depression and despair may be fierce. Joseph had no knowledge of the coming fourteen years of vindication, the fruit of his sufferings. Disillusionment was a cruel foe, for *present* experience gave useful ground for the mocking evil spirits to make fun of his early dreams of honour.

Paul and John never imagined that for two thousand years people would read with immense profit and gain that which came from their prisons. They knew nothing of making spiritual history for the duration of time and eternity. But so it was.

3. The major factor in these imprisonments and apparent limitations was that the fruit was for a time yet to come. Pharaoh's dreams and Joseph's interpretation related to a time not yet come and which had to be prepared for in sheer faith. God knows what is coming, and He Himself prepares and provides for a situation beyond the present. In the deep dark night of adversity, God may be doing something, securing something which will "save much people alive". In our own time, because of the poverty and shallowness of contemporary resources, there is a reverting to and reproducing of the deeper, stronger, and more heart-satisfying ministry of those times when it cost deeply to be "obedient to the heavenly vision".

The writer included among his personal friends a servant of God whose name is known worldwide for his Bible-teaching ministry. That dear man was formerly the minister of a certain church. There came a time when the responsible people in that church decided upon adopting policies and procedures which he believed to be quite contrary to spiritual principles. The minister withstood this on Scriptural grounds. He was forced to leave the church, and because 'this thing was not done in a corner', it was taken up by the secular and religious press, mostly to his condemnation. For several years no church or people would have anything to do with him. He was ostracised, excluded, isolated, and confined to his own home, coming down - with his wife - to their last two shillings and sixpence. But, said he to me, 'It was in those years of imprisonment that I was able to give myself so thoroughly to my Bible as to lay the ground for the many subsequent years of worldwide Bible teaching!' There was no church, however important, and no convention, however large, that would not welcome him (if they were faithful to the Bible), and the university of the city of his later ministry honoured him with a doctorate of divinity.

Not all - *in their lifetime* - are given their vindication, but the principle holds good that, in times of adversity, God prepares and provides for a time to come.

So, Israel was preserved for the subsequent centuries, in spite of the brothers' treachery; because Joseph went to prison and there proved his God.

So we have the infinite treasures of Paul's prison ministry in his letters. So we have the priceless wealth of John's Patmos visions and writings. For these latter there was nothing that they could do but to write; and the writing - though they did not know it - was to be the food of saints for many generations to come.

Prison. God only knows all the exercises of an eager heart when shut out and shut in by - *what seems to be* - the unkindness of men, or the overtaking of adversity!

Vision. And yet such times can be times of an 'open Heaven' and much spiritual enrichment.

Provision. And the fruit may be life to many in a time of spiritual famine.