

ANSWER: Prison

SŪRAH YŪSUF: VERSES 33-35

He said, "My Lord, the prison is dearer to me than what these women invite me to. And unless You do not turn their guile away from me, I shall get inclined towards them and shall be among the ignorant." [33]

So, his Lord accepted his prayer and turned their guile away from him. Surely, He is the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing. [34]

Later on, even after having seen the signs, they deemed it proper to imprison him for a time. [35]

COMMENTARY

My Lord, the prison is dearer to me than what these women invite me to. And unless You turn their guile away from me, I shall get inclined towards them and shall be among the ignorant. Here, the statement of Sayyidnā Yūsuf ‘alayhis salām that **'the prison is dearer to me'** does not reflect any desire or wish to be detained in a prison, instead of that, it is an expression which shows that he would find it easier to face this temporal hardship as compared to that of falling in sin. According to some narrations, when Sayyidnā Yūsuf ‘alayhis salām was confined to the prison, a revelation from Allah Ta'ālā told him: You have put yourself into the prison by what you yourself had said: **(the prison is dearer to me)** and had you asked for well-being (*'āfiyah*), you would have been blessed with perfect well-being. From here we come to know that, to stay safe from a major hardship, saying in prayer that one better be subjected to some minor hardship in lieu of it is not appropriate. Instead of doing that, one should, when under the threat of any hardship, problem or distress, pray to Allah Ta'ālā for nothing but *'āfiyah* (well-being). Therefore, the Holy Prophet ﷺ prohibited a man from praying for *ṣabr* (patience) saying that *ṣabr* is done when one faces distress and hardship. So, rather praying to Allah for *ṣabr*, pray for *'āfiyah*. (Tirmidhī) The uncle of the Holy Prophet ﷺ, Sayyidnā 'Abbās raḍī'allāhu 'anhu asked him: *Teach me a prayer I should make*. He said: *Pray for 'āfiyah (well-being) from your Rabb*. Sayyidna 'Abbas raḍī'allāhu 'anhu says when he, after a period of time, once again asked him to be advised of some du'ā' he should be making, he said: *Pray to Allah Ta'ālā for 'āfiyah in dunya and 'ākhirah*. (Mazharī from Ṭabarānī)

As for the saying of Sayyidna Yusuf ‘alayhis salaam: **'And unless you do not turn their guile away from me, I shall get inclined towards them,'** this is not contrary to the concept of the 'Ismah of prophethood (a prophet's state of being Divinely protected from sin) - because the very outcome of 'Ismah is that Allah Ta'ālā would, by arranging to keep a person safe from sin as a creational imperative, protect him from falling into it. Though Sayyidnā Yūsuf ‘alayhis salām had this desired cover by virtue of his being a prophet, yet he was compelled to make this du'ā' because of the great awe he had for Him in his heart. This also tells us that no one can, without the help and support of Allah Ta'ālā, stay safe from sin. And it also makes it clear that every act of sin is caused by ignorance (*jahālah*), the opposite of which is

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knowledge (*'ilm*), and *'Ilm* (knowledge) demands abstention from sins. (Qurṭubī).

After that, said in **verse 34** was: **So, his Lord accepted his prayer and turned their guile away from him. Surely, He is the All-Hearing, the All-Knowing.** To protect him from the guile of these women, Allah Ta'ālā made his own wise arrangements. Though the 'Azīz of Miṣr and his inner circle was already convinced of the great spiritual qualities of Sayyidnā Yūsuf 'alayhis salām, his piety, fear of Allah and chastity, but rumours of the incident had started circulating in the city. To put a check on this, they found it expedient to confine Sayyidnā Yūsuf 'alayhis salām into the prison for a certain period of time so that there remains no source of any doubt in the concerned family, and that the talk of the town too dies out in due course. So, said at the end of the **verse (35)** was: **Later on, even after having seen the signs, they [the 'Azīz of Miṣr and his advisers] deemed it proper [or expedient] to imprison him for a time.**

Thus, to the prison he was sent.

SŪRAH YŪSUF: VERSES 36-42

And two men entered the prison with him. One of them said, "I have seen myself (in dream) pressing wine." And the other said, "I have seen myself carrying bread on my head of which the birds are eating. Let us know its interpretation. We see you are a man of good deeds." [36]
He said, "No food provided for you shall come to you, but I can give you its description before it comes to you. This is the knowledge my Lord has given me. I have abandoned the way of those who do not believe in Allah, and who are deniers of the Hereafter, [37]
and I have followed the way of my fathers, Ibrāhīm, Ishāq and Ya'qūb. It is not for us that we associate any partners with Allah. All this is of the favour of Allah upon us and upon the people, but most of the people are not grateful. [38]
O my fellow prisoners, are different gods better or Allah, the One, the All-Dominant? [39]
Whatever you worship, other than Him, are nothing but names you have coined, you and your fathers. Allah has sent down no authority for them. Sovereignty belongs to none but Allah. He has ordained that you shall not worship anyone but Him. This is the only right path. But most of the people do not know." [40]
O my fellow prisoners, one of you will serve wine to his master, while the other will be crucified and birds will eat from his head. Destined is the matter you are asking about." [41]
And he (Yūsuf) said to the one whom he believed likely to be released out of the two, "Mention me before your master." Then, the Satan made him forget to mention him to his master. So, he (Yūsuf) remained in prison for a few years. [42]

COMMENTARY

Mentioned in the verses cited above is a supplementary event relating to the story of Sayyidnā Yūsuf

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‘alayhis salām. It has been repeatedly stressed that the Holy Qur’ān is no book of history, or of stories and tales. When a story or historical event is mentioned in it, the sole objective is to provide some lesson, good counsel or crucial guidance on various facets of human life. In the entire Qur’ān and throughout the events relating to many prophets, it is the story of Sayyidnā Yūsuf ‘alayhis salām alone which has been described by the Qur’ān continuously - otherwise, it has considered it sufficient to mention some necessary part of an historical event wherever appropriate.

If you would look at the story of Sayyidnā Yūsuf ‘alayhis salām from the beginning to the end, there are hundreds of lessons to learn, good advices to heed to and important elements of guidance to follow during various stages of human life. This supplementary story too has its graces of guidance in abundance.

The event as it took shape was that, despite the complete absolvment of Sayyidnā Yūsuf ‘alayhis salām from the blame, and the strong establishment of his moral integrity, it was to put an end to the disgrace of people talking about them that the 'Azīz of Miṣr and his wife decided to send Sayyidnā Yūsuf ‘alayhis salām to the prison for some time - which, in reality, was the fulfillment of the *du'ā'* and wish of Sayyidnā Yūsuf ‘alayhis salām, because, for him, it had become extremely difficult to defend his chastity while living in the home of the 'Azīz of Miṣr.

When Sayyidnā Yūsuf ‘alayhis salām arrived at the prison, two other sentenced criminals were also admitted there. One of them was the cup-bearer of the king while the other was a cook. Citing major Tafsīr authorities, Ibn Kathīr has written that these two were arrested on the charge that they had tried to poison the king through food or drink. The case was under investigation, therefore, they were kept in prison.

When Sayyidnā Yūsuf ‘alayhis salām came into the prison, it was because of his prophetic morals, mercy and affection that he used to show concern about all of his fellow inmates and took care of them whenever needed. If anyone became sick, he would call on him and do whatever had to be done for him. For anyone he found sad or distressed, he would have appropriate words of comfort. To lift his spirits, he would gently tell him to observe patience and made the hope of freedom come alive into his heart. He would think of bringing comfort to others at the cost of his own discomfort. For whole nights he would remain engaged in the *'Ibādah* (worship) of Allah Ta'ālā. Seeing his endearing ways, all inmates of the prison became convinced of his high spiritual status. Even the officer-in-charge of the prison was impressed. He said: *Had it been in my power, I would have let you go. Now, this much I can do that you will face no inconvenience here.*

Some Notes to Wonder About

When the officer-in-charge of the prison, or some of the inmates, told Sayyidnā Yūsuf ‘alayhis salām that

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they loved him very much, he said: For God's sake, do not love me - because whenever I have been loved by anyone, I have suffered one way or the other. When I was a child, my paternal aunt loved me. As a result, I was blamed for theft. Then, my father loved me. This made me do a term of detention in a well at the hands of my brothers, then came slavery and expulsion from home country. When the wife of the 'Azīz loved me, I landed into this prison. (Ibn Kathīr, Maẓharī)

These two prisoners who went to the prison along with Sayyidnā Yūsuf 'alayhis salām said to him one day that they thought he was a man of piety and good deeds, therefore, they would like to ask him to give an interpretation of their dream. Sayyidnā Ibn 'Abbās raḍī'allāhu 'anhu and some other leading authorities in Tafsīr have said that they had really seen these dreams. Sayyidnā 'Abdullāh ibn Mas'ūd raḍī'allāhu 'anhu has said that there was no dream. They had simply made it up to test the spiritual excellence and veracity of Sayyidnā Yūsuf 'alayhis salām.

However, one of them, that is, the royal cup-bearer, said: *'I have seen myself (in dream) pressing wine,'* and the other, that is, the cook, said: *'I have seen myself carrying bread on my head of which the birds are eating.'* Then, they requested him to interpret the dreams for them.

Here, Sayyidnā Yūsuf 'alayhis salām has been requested to interpret the dreams. But he, before answering this question, and following his intrinsic prophetic way, begins with the task of *Tablīgh* and invitation to believe and have faith. And by following the principle of Da'wah and by acting wisely, he first tried to create in their hearts a base of confidence in him. To achieve this, he talked about his particular miracle through which he tells them about the food which they receive from their homes, or from somewhere else, and much before it arrives, he is able to tell them the kind, the taste, the quantity and the time of arrival of the food - and that the food turns out to be exactly as predicted: **(This is of the knowledge my Lord has given me)**. He is saying that this has nothing to do with the art of divination through computation of figures and lines (*'ilm al-jafr* and *'ilm al-raml* - not Jafar and Ramal, sooth-saying or any other occult act of conjuring). Instead of all that, this is what my Rabb tells me - and I pass on the information. And this was an open miracle which is proof positive of prophethood and a major cause of confidence. After that, he declares his abhorrence for disbelief and his disengagement from the community of disbelievers. Then, with it, he also stresses that he is a member of the House of Prophets and it is their Community that he adheres to and that he is a scion of the House of Ibrāhīm, Ishāq and Ya'qūb 'alayhis salām. We mentioned confidence a little earlier. Customarily, this kind of inherited nobility, a common family trait, is also a source of creating confidence in a person. After that he said: And it is not for us that we associate any partners with Allah. Then, he said that the *Taufīq* of following a true religion (**'the favour of Allah upon us and upon all people'**) was nothing but the *Faḍl* or grace of Allah Ta'ālā, for it was He who, by giving proper understanding, made the acceptance of truth easy on us. But, most of the people do not appreciate this blessing and do not show their gratitude for it. After having said that, he asked the same prisoners to

tell him if it was better that human beings should be worshiping many gods, or was it better that one becomes a servant of one Allah alone - whose subduing power is all-dominant. Then he referred to idol worship from a different angle. He told them that their fathers and forefathers have taken some idols as their Lord. As for them, they are no more than a lot of names which they have coined on their own. They have no personal attributes which could become deserving of assigning to them the least fund of power - because all of them are inert. This is something one can see with one's own eyes. The only other method through which they could have been taken as true objects of worship would be that Allah Ta'ālā sends down specific injunctions or commandments to worship them. So, in that case, even if observation and reason had not been willing to accept their godhood but, because of the Divine command, we would have left our observation and reason aside and would have obeyed the command of Allah. But, this is not there either - because Allah Ta'ālā did not send down any argument or proof for their worship. Instead of that, what He said was but that Law and Sovereignty belonged to Allah Ta'ālā with no one having a right in it; and the command He gave was no other but that we should not worship anyone or anything other than Allah. Finally, he said: **'This is the only right path - which was bestowed on my forefathers by Allah Ta'ālā. but most of the people do not know this reality.'**

After having made his call to truth, Sayyidnā Yūsuf 'alayhis salām turned to the dreams mentioned by two of his prison mates declaring that one of the two of them will get his release, return to his job and keep serving wine to his master. As for the other, the crime against him will stand proved and he will be crucified and birds will eat from his head.

An Example of Prophetic Compassion

Ibn Kathīr has said: Though the dreams of both these prisoners were separate, and fixed was the interpretation of each, and also fixed was the fate that the royal cup-bearer will be acquitted and return to his job and the cook will be crucified. But, because of his prophetic compassion and clemency, he did not specifically mention as to who among the two will be hanged so that the person concerned may be spared from becoming obsessed by the very thought of it right from that time. Instead of that, he made a general statement saying that one of them will be released and the other will be crucified.

At the end, he told them that the interpretation of their dreams given by him was not arrived at by conjecture. It was Divine decree which cannot be averted. Commentators who have called the dreams described by these people as false and made-up, they have also said: When Sayyidnā Yūsuf 'alayhis salām interpreted their dreams, they came up with the remark that they had just not seen any dream. They had simply made it up. Thereupon, Sayyidnā Yūsuf 'alayhis salām said: **(Destined is the matter you are asking about)**. In other words, it would mean: Whether you saw this dream, or did not, now the event will come to be as described - the purpose of which is that this is the punishment of the sin, of making up a false dream, committed by you, a punishment which has been identified in the interpretation of the dream.

After that, to the person about whom Sayyidnā Yūsuf ‘alayhis salām had gathered from the interpretation of his dream that he would be released, he said: When you are released from the prison, mention me before your master as the innocent person who is still languishing in the prison. But, once released, this person forgot about this message of Sayyidnā Yūsuf ‘alayhis salām, as a result of which, his freedom was further delayed and he had to stay in prison for a few more years. The word used in the Qur’ān is: (*bid‘a sinīn: a few years*). This word holds good for a figure between three to nine. Some commentators have said that he had to live in the prison for a period of seven more years.

Injunctions and Rulings

Worth pondering on are many Aḥkām, Masā’il, useful lessons and elements of guidance that emerge from the verses under reference. They are as given below:

1. Consider the confinement of Sayyidnā Yūsuf ‘alayhis salām into a prison which is the notorious turf of criminals and bad characters. But, he treated them too with his characteristic good morals and social graces, as a result of which, all of them became enamoured with him. This tells us that it is the duty of reformers that they should, by dealing with sinners and criminals with compassion and concern, bring them closer, let them become familiar, connected, and reliant on them. Also necessary is that they should not betray any attitude of hatred or distaste for them at any step.
2. From the statement: (**We see you are a man of good deeds**), we find out that the interpretation of a dream should be sought particularly from persons one trusts in as righteous, good in deeds and sympathetic.
3. The third thing we learn here is about the ideal conduct of those who carry the *da'wah* of truth and serve people by working for their moral and social betterment. In this connection, their first duty is to bring round people created by Allah to put their trust in them through their good morals and conduct, and their intellectual and practical excellences - whether they have to unfold and express some of those excellences, as was done by Sayyidnā Yūsuf ‘alayhis salām on this occasion when he not only talked about his miracle but also mentioned his being a member of the House of Prophets. Such a statement of personal excellence - if it is based on the intention to serve people to become better and not to prove one's personal rank - will not be considered as the 'self-praise' which has been prohibited in the Holy Qur’ān: that is, do not talk about the purity of your own self. (Tafsīr Mazḥarī)
4. Pointed to here is an important principle of communication and correction (*Tablīgh* and *Irshād*). It is the duty of the carrier of a Call (*Dā’ī*) and reformer (*Muṣliḥ*) that he should, at all times and under all circumstances, keep his constant mission of *Da'wah* and *Tablīgh* come first of all he does. In other words, if someone comes to him for something, he should not forget his real mission - as was done by Sayyidnā Yūsuf ‘alayhis salām when these prisoners came to him to ask for an interpretation of their dreams. At that time, before answering their request for the interpretation of their dreams, he gave them the gift of right guidance through his *Tablīgh* and *Irshād*. Please do not take *Da'wah* and *Tablīgh* as something which takes place in a conference, or on a pulpit or stage alone. This job is done

far more effectively through personal contacts and private exchanges.

5. Another aspect of this very effort of telling people what is right and seeking their betterment through it (*Irshād* and *Iṣlah*) is: Whatever is said in this connection should be said with the strategy of wisdom in a way that it goes into the heart of the addressee. This is how it was done by Sayyidnā Yūsuf ‘alayhis salām. He succeeded in showing to them that the excellences he had were the direct outcome of his disengagement with disbelief and adoption of Islām as his faith. After that he described the drawbacks and shortcomings of *Kufr* and *Shirk* in a soft manner which appeals to the heart.

6. Another problem resolved here is about how bad news should be handled. If, that which has to be communicated to an addressee happens to be painful or repugnant, yet it be necessary that it be disclosed, then, it should be presented before the addressee, as far as possible, in a way that it brings the least discomfort to him. This is as it was when the death of one person was destined as interpreted on the basis of his dream, but Sayyidnā Yūsuf ‘alayhis salām kept it ambiguous. He did not make it precise and fixed by telling him that he will be the one to be hanged. (Ibn Kathīr, Maḏharī)

7. It will be recalled that Sayyidnā Yūsuf ‘alayhis salām had sought his release from the prison when he asked the acquitted prisoner: Mention me before your master. This tells us that making someone a medium of effort in order to get out of some difficulty is not against the principle of *Tawakkul* (Trust in Allah).

8. Another view of this problem is that Allah Ta'ālā does not like His great prophets making efforts to achieve everything permissible and go on to make a human being the medium of their release. This is so because the absence of any medium between them and Allah Ta'ālā spells out the true identity of prophets. Perhaps, that was why this prisoner forgot about the message given by Sayyidnā Yūsuf ‘alayhis salām which made him stay in the prison for many more years. In a Ḥadīth too, the Holy Prophet ﷺ has pointed out in this direction.

This concludes the commentary for Day 26.