

Genesis 41 – Joseph’s Rise to Power

Review

Last time we looked at Joseph’s life as a slave in Egypt. Initially, Joseph served in the house of Potiphar the captain of the Egyptian guard who bought Joseph from the Ishmaelite traders who had brought him down to Egypt. But when Potiphar’s wife falsely accused Joseph of trying to force himself upon her, Potiphar had Joseph thrown into prison. While there, Joseph’s fellow prisoners – Pharaoh’s chief baker and chief cupbearer had disturbing dreams which Joseph interpreted for them by God’s revelation. After Pharaoh executed the baker and released the cupbearer to return to his duties, Joseph remained imprisoned in the house of the captain of the guard.

Pharaoh’s Dreams

As we take up the story now in Genesis 41, we see that Joseph remained in prison for two more years after the cupbearer’s release.

¹After two whole years, Pharaoh dreamed that he was standing by the Nile, ²and behold, there came up out of the Nile seven cows, attractive and plump, and they fed in the reed grass. ³And behold, seven other cows, ugly and thin, came up out of the Nile after them, and stood by the other cows on the bank of the Nile. ⁴And the ugly, thin cows ate up the seven attractive, plump cows. And Pharaoh awoke. ⁵And he fell asleep and dreamed a second time. And behold, seven ears of grain, plump and good, were growing on one stalk. ⁶And behold, after them sprouted seven ears, thin and blighted by the east wind. ⁷And the thin ears swallowed up the seven plump, full ears. And Pharaoh awoke, and behold, it was a dream. ⁸So in the morning his spirit was troubled, and he sent and called for all the magicians of Egypt and all its wise men. Pharaoh told them his dreams, but there was none who could interpret them to Pharaoh. Genesis

41:1-8 (ESV)

As I have often noted, most of the time our dreams have no particular significance. I personally believe that the dreaming mechanism is used in our brains to organize and clean up our short-term memory – moving the memories of the day’s events from a sort of temporary storage that we might think of as being like a disorganized collection of post-it notes detailing the individual events of the day, into a more organized collection we might think of as being akin to a daily journal in which we not only record the individual events but incorporate them into a sort of cross-reference system connecting those events we consider significant enough that we might need to recall them later. Of course, this is all just speculation, but the point is that most of the time our dreams have no ongoing significance once their temporary usefulness has been fulfilled.

But occasionally, God uses dreams to communicate a greater purpose or provide us some special insight into His works. One Biblical example that springs immediately to mind is Jacob’s dream at Bethel (Genesis 28) of a ladder reaching up to Heaven from which God reiterated His promise to Abraham and Isaac that He would give the land of Canaan to Jacob’s descendants as an inheritance. Another example is the appearance of an angel of the LORD to Mary’s husband Joseph (Matthew 2:13) in a dream warning him of King Herod’s plan to kill all the baby boys of Bethlehem and directing Joseph to flee with his family to Egypt. God used that warning dream to rescue the baby Jesus out of death at the hands of Herod’s soldiers so that He could then use Jesus’ sacrificial death on the cross to rescue all mankind out of death in our sins.

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Similarly, we have seen that God used dreams in the life of Jacob’s son Joseph to kindle jealousy and hatred in the hearts of Joseph’s brothers so they would eventually sell him into slavery in Egypt (Genesis 37). Later, when Joseph was in prison, God used Joseph to interpret the dreams of his fellow prisoner – Pharaoh’s cupbearer – to sow the seed in the cupbearer’s mind that would eventually lead to Joseph’s release from the prison and his rise to power in Egypt second only to Pharaoh. But even those dreams through which God was working were only steps along the path of God’s preordained plan of salvation for Joseph’s family out of starvation in the coming famine, and eventually for all mankind through Jesus’ birth, sacrificial death on the cross, and resurrection.

9Then the chief cupbearer said to Pharaoh, “I remember my offenses today. 10When Pharaoh was angry with his servants and put me and the chief baker in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, 11we dreamed on the same night, he and I, each having a dream with its own interpretation. 12A young Hebrew was there with us, a servant of the captain of the guard. When we told him, he interpreted our dreams to us, giving an interpretation to each man according to his dream. 13And as he interpreted to us, so it came about. I was restored to my office, and the baker was hanged.” Genesis 41:9-13 (ESV)

Finally, the cupbearer remembered Joseph’s plea from Genesis 40:14 to mention him to Pharaoh and gain his release from prison. “Better late than never,” so the saying goes. But that leaves us to wonder why God allowed Joseph to remain in prison for another two years. Rather than wildly speculate, we must simply trust that God was working all these things together in Joseph’s life (as He does in *all* our lives) for ultimate good in His own perfect way and on His own perfect schedule. God clearly needed to use whatever happened in Joseph’s life during that time to prepare him for the ministry that God was about to assign to him and to lay the groundwork in the Egyptian society and in the lives of Joseph’s family back in Canaan for the mighty work of salvation God was about to perform – beginning with Joseph’s interpretation of Pharaoh’s dreams and leading ultimately to Jesus’ work of salvation for all mankind out of death!

But once again, we’re getting ahead of ourselves. For now, let’s focus on Pharaoh’s dreams.

14Then Pharaoh sent and called Joseph, and they quickly brought him out of the pit. And when he had shaved himself and changed his clothes, he came in before Pharaoh. 15And Pharaoh said to Joseph, “I have had a dream, and there is no one who can interpret it. I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it.” 16Joseph answered Pharaoh, “It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable [שָׁלוֹם *šālóm*] ***answer.”*** Genesis 41:14-16 (ESV)

Genesis 41:14 is intriguing in that Joseph shaved himself before he appeared before Pharaoh. Being clean-shaven was considered a status symbol for upper-class Egyptian men in Joseph’s time (<https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/4/116743/Ancient-Egyptians-proven-the-first-to-take-shaving-seriously>). Conversely, in orthodox Hebrew society throughout history men do not shave their beards and always keep their heads covered in public. While leaving the beard unshaven is traditional, the Law of Moses does not forbid shaving except for Levites and priests (Leviticus 21:1-6). In fact, shaving of the head and beard is *required* under the Law for healing of some skin diseases of the head and face (Leviticus 13:21-37) and for men who have taken the so-called Nazirite Vow to separate and consecrate themselves to God (Numbers 6:5). This consecration was usually for a limited

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time although Samson the judge was consecrated as a Nazirite for his entire life by God’s own command (Judges 13:1-5).

Notice in Genesis 41:16 that Joseph was careful to inform Pharaoh that his seeming talent for interpreting dreams was nothing of his own, but rather a manifestation of God’s own power working through him. We have noted in previous studies that one way we can discern if seeming miracles are truly from God or lying wonders of our great enemy is whether the person through whom God works humbly acknowledges that the work is by God’s power using the “miracle worker” as His instrument or attempt to claim the glory for themselves. This reminds me of when the 72 disciples that Jesus sent out to heal the sick and proclaim the imminent coming of the Kingdom of God (Luke 10). When these disciples returned joyfully saying, “**...even the demons are subject to us in your name!**”, Jesus gently rebuked them saying, “**...do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.**”

Before we move on take note of the phrase “**...a favorable answer.**” at the end of Genesis 41:16. The Hebrew word rendered as “**favorable**” by the ESV and other English translations is **שָׁלוֹם** *šālôm*. We usually think of this word as meaning “peace.” Indeed, some other language translations (e.g. the KJV, NKJV, and ASV) render the final phrase of Genesis 41:16 as “**...an answer of peace.**” But the word **שָׁלוֹם** *šālôm* can also mean completeness (in number), safety, soundness (in body), welfare, health, prosperity, quiet, tranquility, or contentment. Perhaps Joseph really meant to say that the interpretation of Pharaoh’s dream would provide “**...a complete answer.**”

But let’s press on.

17Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Behold, in my dream I was standing on the banks of the Nile. 18Seven cows, plump and attractive, came up out of the Nile and fed in the reed grass. 19Seven other cows came up after them, poor and very ugly and thin, such as I had never seen in all the land of Egypt. 20And the thin, ugly cows ate up the first seven plump cows, 21but when they had eaten them no one would have known that they had eaten them, for they were still as ugly as at the beginning. Then I awoke. 22I also saw in my dream seven ears growing on one stalk, full and good. 23Seven ears, withered, thin, and blighted by the east wind, sprouted after them, 24and the thin ears swallowed up the seven good ears. And I told it to the magicians, but there was no one who could explain it to me.” Genesis 41:17-24

(ESV)

There’s nothing much to add here. Verses 17-24 are an almost verbatim repeat of verses 1-8. The only minor differences are Pharaoh’s remark that the seven lean and ugly cows did not appear to be any better after they devoured the seven healthy cows, and Pharaoh didn’t bother to tell Joseph explicitly that he had awakened briefly between the two dreams.

25Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, “The dreams of Pharaoh are one; God [אלהים] *’elôhîm*] has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do. 26The seven good cows are seven years, and the seven good ears are seven years; the dreams are one. 27The seven lean and ugly cows that came up after them are seven years, and the seven empty ears blighted by the east wind are also seven years of famine. 28It is as I told Pharaoh; God has shown to Pharaoh what he is about to do. 29There will come seven years of great plenty throughout

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all the land of Egypt, ³⁰but after them there will arise seven years of famine, and all the plenty will be forgotten in the land of Egypt. The famine will consume the land, ³¹and the plenty will be unknown in the land by reason of the famine that will follow, for it will be very severe. ³²And the doubling of Pharaoh’s dream means that the thing is fixed by God, and God will shortly bring it about. Genesis 41:25-32 (ESV)

Joseph’s interpretation of Pharaoh’s dreams seems straightforward, and it is tempting to simply move on without further comment. But there is something very significant about Joseph’s first encounter with Pharaoh that’s worth noting. Notice that Joseph used the Hebrew Name אֱלֹהִים 'elōhîm four times in this passage referring to God. In the very [first lesson](#) of our Genesis study, we discussed this Name of God extensively. In that lesson, we pointed out that God’s Word makes no attempt to make an apologetic argument for God’s existence. God’s eternal being as a Holy Trinity is simply taken for as being universally acknowledged in the Bible from its very first verse – “*In the beginning God* [אֱלֹהִים 'elōhîm]...” Thus, we say that God is “from everlasting to everlasting.” Our finite minds are utterly incapable of truly understanding this eternal, triune nature of God. We simply believe in God’s being with the tacit, humble admission that we will never truly be able to understand God’s nature – much less explain it.

Just as God’s Word makes no attempt to explain God’s existence and nature, neither did Joseph attempt to do so in speaking with Pharaoh. If we consider this carefully, this was quite brave of Joseph given that Pharaoh was the head of the idolatrous pantheistic Egyptian religious system. Pharaoh was deemed by the Egyptian people and religious leaders to be a god in the flesh of man. Even if Pharaoh didn’t believe this in his own heart of hearts, he went along with the idea at least to all public knowledge. Pharaoh had a proven track record of executing those around him who displeased him. Nevertheless, Joseph continued to give credit to God for both the revelation He had given by Pharaoh’s dreams with their interpretation and for His plan of salvation for the Egyptian people out of the coming famine.

Before we move on, take note of Joseph’s statement that God had emphasized the importance of the revelation by doubling Pharaoh’s dreams. We find such repetition frequently in God’s Word. The Hebrew poetry we find in the words of the prophets and in the Psalms, often uses repetition as a poetic tool. For example, Psalm 136 (ESV) repeats the phrase, “*...for His steadfast love endures forever*” in each of its 26 stanzas. At the beginning of His sermon on the mount, Jesus used a similar approach, beginning each of His beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-11) with the words, “*Blessed are...*” In other passages God uses repetition to emphasize a lesson He wishes to impart, as here in Genesis 41 with Pharaoh’s dreams. Frank – a colleague of mine when I worked as a technical instructor – was fond of saying, “Three times for the common mind.” Frank realized as God does that sometimes it takes a few repetitions to pound a point through stubborn mankind’s thick skulls. But meanwhile, back in Genesis 41...

After giving Pharaoh God’s interpretation of his dreams, Joseph confidently gave advice to Pharaoh on how he should respond to the revelation God had given through them.

³³Now therefore let Pharaoh select a discerning and wise man, and set him over the land of Egypt. ³⁴Let Pharaoh proceed to appoint overseers over the land and take one-fifth of the produce of the land of Egypt during the seven plentiful years. ³⁵And let them gather all the food of these good years that are coming and store up grain under the authority of Pharaoh for food in the cities, and let them keep it. ³⁶That food shall be a reserve for the

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land against the seven years of famine that are to occur in the land of Egypt, so that the land may not perish through the famine.” ³⁷*This proposal pleased Pharaoh and all his servants.* Genesis 41:33-37 (ESV)

The boldness of Joseph in giving unsolicited advice to an absolute monarch like Pharaoh is striking. We might well imagine Pharaoh responding by saying something like, “Don’t tell me how to do my job.” This is reminiscent of the words of encouragement Jesus gave to His disciples after warning them that after He ascended back to His Father, they would be hauled up before kings and other men of high position to defend their proclamation of His Gospel.

9“But be on your guard. For they will deliver you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them. 10And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations. 11And when they bring you to trial and deliver you over, do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. 12And brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death. 13And you will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. Mark 13:9-13 (ESV)

Joseph Made Second to Pharaoh in Egypt

38And Pharaoh said to his servants, “Can we find a man like this, in whom is the Spirit of God [אֱלֹהִים 'elōhîm]?” ³⁹*Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Since God has shown you all this, there is none so discerning and wise as you are. 40You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command. Only as regards the throne will I be greater than you.”* ⁴¹*And Pharaoh said to Joseph, “See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt.”* ⁴²*Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph’s hand, and clothed him in garments of fine linen and put a gold chain about his neck. 43And he made him ride in his second chariot. And they called out before him, “Bow the knee!” Thus he set him over all the land of Egypt. 44Moreover, Pharaoh said to Joseph, “I am Pharaoh, and without your consent no one shall lift up hand or foot in all the land of Egypt.”* Genesis 41:38-44 (ESV)

Just as Joseph’s master Potiphar and the captain of the house of the guard in which Joseph was imprisoned recognized the work of God’s Spirit in Joseph’s life and in his words, so did Pharaoh. This is made even more amazing by the fact that all of them were idolators who didn’t even worship the One True and Living God of the Hebrews.

By giving Joseph his signet ring, Pharaoh formalized his assigning Joseph as his second-in-command. Joseph then used the ring as his credential in assuming this powerful government post. The signet ring was Joseph’s proof to strangers that he was authorized to act as Pharaoh’s proxy. Such rings were used to authenticate official documents by impressing an authority’s identity into them in similar fashion as modern notary seals are used on documents like birth certificates or by impressing it into the wax seal of official scrolls as proof that a sealed document had not been tampered with along the way from the sending official to its intended recipient.

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45And Pharaoh called Joseph’s name Zaphenath-paneah. And he gave him in marriage Asenath, the daughter of Potiphera priest of On. So Joseph went out over the land of Egypt. Genesis 41:45 (ESV)

The names we read about in this verse are of course Hebrew transliterations of the Egyptian names which would have been written as hieroglyphs in the Egyptian language. Joseph’s Egyptian name means "treasury of the glorious rest," apparently reflecting Pharaoh’s sense of **שָׁלוֹם** *šālôm* he felt after receiving the complete and actionable interpretation of his dreams from God.

There is no other mention in God’s Word of Joseph’s Egyptian wife apart from her roles as Joseph’s wife and the mother of his half-Egyptian sons. Neither is there any further Biblical information given about Joseph’s father-in-law Potiphera. The ancient Egyptian town of On in which Potiphera served as priest to the Egyptian sun god Ra was also known in Greek as Heliopolis. It was located along the lower Nile near the root of the fertile Nile delta near the center of modern Cairo.

46Joseph was thirty years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh king of Egypt. And Joseph went out from the presence of Pharaoh and went through all the land of Egypt. 47During the seven plentiful years the earth produced abundantly, 48and he gathered up all the food of these seven years, which occurred in the land of Egypt, and put the food in the cities. He put in every city the food from the fields around it. 49And Joseph stored up grain in great abundance, like the sand of the sea, until he ceased to measure it, for it could not be measured. Genesis 41:46-49 (ESV)

Here in this passage we see that Joseph faithfully served Pharaoh laying up enough food during the seven years of plenty to carry Egypt (and indeed the entire region) through the coming famine just as Joseph himself had suggested when he provided God’s interpretation of Pharaoh’s disturbing dreams.

Since Joseph remained in prison for two years after his fellow prisoner Pharaoh’s chief cupbearer was released, we can deduce that Joseph was at most 28 years old when his master Potiphar put him into prison but was likely somewhat younger. So, by the time Joseph rose to his position of prominence in the Egyptian government it had been about ten years since he first brought the bad report about his brothers to their father Jacob at the age of 17.

ASIDE – Here we find another little detail of Joseph’s life in which he modeled the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Just as Joseph was thirty years old when he entered Pharaoh’s service, we know from Luke 3:23 that Jesus was also about thirty years old when He was baptized by John and began His earthly ministry.

50Before the year of famine came, two sons were born to Joseph. Asenath, the daughter of Potiphera priest of On, bore them to him. 51Joseph called the name of the firstborn Manasseh [מְנַשֶּׁה m’naššê – causing to forget]. “For,” he said, “God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father’s house.” 52The name of the second he called Ephraim [אֶפְרַיִם ‘eprayim – I shall be doubly fruitful], “For God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction.” Genesis 41:50-52 (ESV)

Once again, we see an aspect of Joseph’s life that models Jesus’ ministry. This small passage contains a tiny gem of encouragement for all those who serve God in their affliction. The names Joseph gave to his sons reflect an attitude of optimism and even joy over the difficult ministry God had given him.

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And of course, Joseph’s attitude of joy in his affliction reflects the willingness and even joy of Jesus in laying down his own life on our behalf. This is reminiscent of the encouragement Peter gave to the early church suffering persecution.

¹²Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. **1 Peter 4:12-14 (ESV)**

⁵³The seven years of plenty that occurred in the land of Egypt came to an end, ⁵⁴and the seven years of famine began to come, as Joseph had said. There was famine in all lands, but in all the land of Egypt there was bread. ⁵⁵When all the land of Egypt was famished, the people cried to Pharaoh for bread. Pharaoh said to all the Egyptians, “Go to Joseph. What he says to you, do.”

⁵⁶So when the famine had spread over all the land, Joseph opened all the storehouses and sold to the Egyptians, for the famine was severe in the land of Egypt. ⁵⁷Moreover, all the earth came to Egypt to Joseph to buy grain, because the famine was severe over all the earth. **Genesis 41:53-57 (ESV)**

Here at last, we find the revelation of God’s purpose in allowing Joseph’s brothers to sell him into slavery in Egypt. The seven-year famine we read about here and in the next few chapters affected not only Egypt, but the entire eastern Mediterranean region, and was possibly even more widespread. Therefore, the famine threatened the survival of Joseph’s family in Canaan. God allowed Joseph to suffer for a time in slavery and imprisonment in Egypt so that he would be in the proper place at the proper time for God to use him to ensure his family’s survival.

Most importantly, God used Joseph’s presence and position of power in Egypt to ensure the survival of Joseph’s little nephew Perez – the son of Joseph’s brother Judah through whose line King David and ultimately Jesus of Nazareth the promised **מָשִׁיחַ māšîaḥ**.

Here also, we find the most important aspect of Joseph’s life and ministry that models the life and ministry of Jesus. Just as God used Joseph’s ministry in Egypt to rescue the people of the ancient middle east out of death due to the global famine, so God used Jesus’ sinless life on Earth, sacrificial death of the cross, and resurrection from the dead to rescue all mankind out of death due to our sins.

Looking Ahead

Next time we’ll see the food shortages of the global famine began to threaten the lives of Joseph’s family in Canaan. So in desperation, Joseph’s ten oldest brothers traveled from Canaan down to Egypt where they encountered Joseph serving as a high official in the Egyptian government, but did not recognize him.